



**THE FAST-CHANGING ARCTIC:
RETHINKING ARCTIC SECURITY
FOR A WARMER WORLD**
Edited by Barry Scott Zellen

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12. Mirror Images? Canada, Russia, and the Circumpolar World'

P. Whitney Lackenbauer

The United States of America, Norway, Denmark and Canada are conducting a united and coordinated policy of barring Russia from the riches of the shelf. It is quite obvious that much of this doesn't coincide with economic, geopolitical and defense interests of Russia, and constitutes a systemic threat to its national security.

Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev,
Rossiiskaya Gazeta, March 30, 2009

Canada takes its responsibility for its Arctic lands and water seriously and "this is why we react so strongly when other nations like Russia engage in exercises and other activities that appear to challenge our security in the North ... [and] push the envelope when it comes to Canada's Arctic.... The Canadian Forces have a real role to play in defending our sovereignty in the North."

Hon. Lawrence Cannon
to the Economic Club of Canada, November 20, 2009

The Arctic is a topic of growing geostrategic importance. Climate change, resource issues, undefined continental shelf boundaries, potential maritime transportation routes, and security issues now factor significantly into the domestic and foreign policy agendas of the five Arctic littoral states. The region has also attracted the attention of non-Arctic states and organizations, some of which assert the need to protect the Arctic “global commons” from excessive national claims and allegedly covet Arctic resources. Whether these geopolitical dynamics constitute an inherently conflictual “Arctic race” or a mutually beneficial “polar saga” unfolding according to international law is hotly debated.

Both Canada and Russia have extensive jurisdictions and sovereign rights in the Arctic and see the Arctic as their frontier of destiny. The region plays a central role in their national identities. Both countries intertwine sovereignty issues with strong rhetoric asserting their status as “Arctic powers” and have promised to invest in new military capabilities to defend their jurisdictions. Fortunately, for all the attention that hard-line rhetoric generates in the media and in academic debate, it is only one part of a more complex picture.

Nevertheless, scholars like Rob Huebert point to Russia as Canada’s foremost adversary in the circumpolar world.² If Americans have constituted the primary threat to Canadian sovereignty, the Russians have been re-cast in the familiar Cold War role of the primary security threat. Russia, after all, has been the most determined Arctic player. Its domestic and foreign policy has repeatedly emphasized the region’s importance, particularly since Putin’s second presidential term, and assertive rhetoric about protecting national interests has been followed up by actions seeking to enhance Russia’s position in the region. A new Arctic strategy released in September 2008 described the region as Russia’s main base for natural resources in the twenty-first century. Considering Russia’s dependency on these resources and its concerns that Western interests are diverging from their own, that the U.S. still intends to “keep Russia down,” and that the Western military presence in the Arctic reflects anti-Russian strategic agendas,³ “realists” like Huebert and Scott Borgerson interpret the Russian approach as confrontational and destabilizing. Does this “hard security” discourse portend an “Arctic arms race”⁴ and a new Cold War in the region?

The key audience for confrontational rhetoric is domestic. In its official policy and statements on the High North, Russia follows a pragmatic line and pursues its territorial claims in compliance with international law. Leaders

dismiss foreign criticisms that they are flexing their muscles to extend their claims beyond their legal entitlement. The prevailing *international message* that Russia seeks to project is that it will abide by international law – but that it will not be pushed around by neighbors who might encroach on its Arctic jurisdiction.⁵ This mixed messaging is disconcerting to Canadian observers who see Russia as belligerent and aggressive. Ironically, our own discourse and positions are strikingly similar. On the one hand, the Harper government adopts provocative rhetoric, proclaiming that it will “stand up for Canada,” that we must “use it or lose it” (presuming that there is a polar race), and promoting Canada as an Arctic and energy “superpower.” It has adopted a sovereignty-security framework as a pretext to invest in Canadian Forces (CF) capabilities and extend jurisdictional controls. Canada’s messaging and actions are sending the same signals as Russia’s. Even Minister of Foreign Affairs Lawrence Cannon’s speeches, which emphasize and promote circumpolar cooperation, also assert the need to defend against outside challenges – specifically Russian activities that purportedly “push the envelope” and “challenge” Canadian sovereignty and security. These alleged threats are mobilized to affirm that the Canadian Forces have a “real role” to play in defending our northern sovereignty.⁶ Like much of the government’s rhetoric, however, the precise nature of this role, and the nature of the Russian threat, remains ambiguous.

This chapter reflects upon how Canada reads – and *constructs* – Russian actions and intentions in the Arctic.⁷ Do the countries see the strategic situation in fundamentally different ways? Are Canada and Russia on an Arctic collision course, or are we regional actors with shared interests and opportunities for expanded cooperation? As critical as Canadian politicians, journalists, and academic “purveyors of polar peril” (to borrow Franklyn Griffiths’ phrase) are of Russia’s rhetoric and behavior in the Arctic, Canada is actually mirroring it. Politicians in both countries use this dynamic to justify investments in national defense. If this “saber-rattling” is carefully staged and does not inhibit dialog and cooperation on issues of common interest, this theater may actually serve the short-term military interests of both countries. But the long-term goal of a stable and secure circumpolar world, where each Arctic littoral state enjoys its sovereign rights, must not be lost in hyperbolic rhetoric geared toward domestic audiences for political gain.

The Role of the Arctic in National Mythologies

The Arctic factors heavily into both Russian and Canadian national mythologies. Although Russia's approach to the North was sporadic from the era of Ivan the Terrible in the mid-sixteenth century to the early twentieth century, dreamers like scholar Mikhail Lomonosov proclaimed that "it is in Siberia and the waters of the Arctic that Russia's might well begin to grow." Russia's sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867 ended the dream of a great Russian-American fur empire, and war and revolution stymied development and exploration in the Arctic until 1920. The new Bolshevik government set its sights on the untapped economic potential of the Arctic, historian John McCannon observes, and its "conquest of the North" campaign in the 1930s "helped to hold the Soviet nation together during an era of great stress and strain in a way that simple coercion could not have done." The Arctic culture of the high Stalinist period, which wedded the "enigmatic mystique" of the North Pole with ideas of industrial and technological prowess, made the Russian Arctic "one of the most visible and appealing elements in a cultural environment already saturated with attempts to make every deed seem epic and grand."⁸ Echoes of this patriotic propaganda resonate with current Russian political rhetoric, which also combines iconic imagery of heroic exploration, resource wealth, and military muscle-flexing to try to build consensus about the need to defend this strategic frontier.

Canada inherited its Arctic Archipelago from Great Britain in 1880 but governed its northern territories in a "fit of absence of mind" – to borrow Louis St. Laurent's apt characterization – until after the Second World War. The primary impetus for development was the Cold War, which placed the Arctic at the center of superpower geopolitics and American security agendas in conflict with Canada's sovereignty. The United States largely dictated the pace of "military modernization," which had had profound socio-economic, cultural, and environmental impacts on the North.⁹ Civilian projects were more tentative. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's bold "Northern Vision," unveiled in February 1958, was a national economic development strategy at its core. It was only partially realized before he lost his political focus.¹⁰ Despite land claim agreements and new governance systems, the Arctic has remained an unfulfilled political and economic opportunity ever since.

The "sovietization" of the Russian North yielded more deliberate economic development. Closed industrial cities, as well as infamous gulags,

joined military bases along the northern frontier by the 1940s, but they did not reflect a coherent strategic plan for the Russian Arctic. “From the 1940s through the end of the Soviet era in the early 1990s, expansion in the North continued to be haphazard, plagued perpetually by shortcomings and disorganization,” McCannon summarized. Resource development and the improper disposal of radioactive material led to environmental degradation, and the collapse of the Soviet economy left Arctic communities in miserable conditions.¹¹ While countries such as Canada talk about the Arctic as a potential resource base for the future, Russia has been exploiting its riches for decades. Nevertheless, both countries share a sense of northern destiny that drives political, economic, and popular interest in “their” Arctic.

The Future Arctic: Polar Race or Polar Saga?

Development scenarios frame issues and influence priorities. In 2008, the Global Business Network published a framework to analyze plausible futures for Arctic marine navigation. The horizontal axis describes the degree of relative governance stability within and beyond the region, while the vertical axis describes the level of demand for resources and trade. This yields four scenarios. Neither “Polar Lows” nor “Polar Preserve” would bring the economic development that the Russian and Canadian governments desire. An “Arctic Race” envisions intense competition for resources and a corresponding willingness for states to violate rules and take unilateral action to defend their national interests. In this scenario, shared interests are few and unreliable, and rapid climate change will fuel a resource feeding frenzy in an anarchic region.¹² By contrast, the “Arctic Saga” scenario anticipates “business pragmatism that balances global collaboration and compromise with successful development of the resources of the Arctic” in a manner that “includes concern for the preservation of Arctic ecosystems and cultures.”¹³

By the early 1990s, Russia and Canada seemed to be moving towards an Arctic saga. Mikhael Gorbachev’s landmark Murmansk speech in October 1987 called for the Arctic to become a “zone of peace.” Although Western commentators treated the Russian policy initiatives with scepticism, the potential de-securitization of the region opened up opportunities for political, economic, and environmental agendas previously subordinated to national security interests. In Canada, the Mulroney government shifted from a strong



FIG. 1. FUTURE ARCTIC SCENARIOS MATRIX BY THE GLOBAL BUSINESS NETWORK (GBN) FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE ARCTIC MARINE ENVIRONMENT WORKING GROUP OF THE ARCTIC COUNCIL (2008). SOURCE: ARCTIC COUNCIL.

sovereignty and military emphasis after the 1985 *Polar Sea* voyage to propose, in 1989, an international Arctic Council predicated on circumpolar cooperation. Prominent commentators suggested that circumpolar cooperation would allay Western concerns about post-Soviet aspirations in the Arctic. “It would be no small accomplishment for Canada to bring Russia onto the world stage in its first multilateral negotiation since the formation of the Soviet Union,” Franklyn Griffiths argued. “All the better if the purpose of the negotiation is to create a new instrument for civility and indeed civilized behavior in relations between Arctic states, between these states and their aboriginal peoples, and in the way southern majorities treat their vulnerable

northern environment.”¹⁴ Tom Axworthy agreed: “As Arctic neighbours and as the biggest members of the circumpolar North, Canada and Russia share many common interests and problems. We must do what we can to encourage Russian democracy and oppose the resurgence of ultra-nationalist and autocratic forces there. The creation of an Arctic Council will be a modest but real recognition that Russia has joined the democratic community of nations.”¹⁵

Canada–Russia relations in the Arctic began to thaw. In 1992, Mulroney and Yeltsin issued a Declaration of Friendship and Cooperation, then a formal Arctic Cooperation Agreement. In the absence of a sovereignty or security crisis, Ottawa had space to accommodate broader interpretations of security with environmental, cultural, and human dimensions. After 1993, the Chrétien Liberals continued to promote a message of diplomacy, governance, and long-term human capacity-building. In 2000, *The Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy* (NDFP) set four objectives for circumpolar engagement. Traditional security threats were notably absent. One of the NDFP’s key priorities was working with Russia to address northern challenges such as cleaning up Cold War environmental legacies and funding Russian indigenous peoples’ participation in the Arctic Council. “Perhaps more than any other country,” the NDFP declared, “Canada is uniquely positioned to build a strategic partnership with Russia for development of the Arctic.”¹⁶

Over the last decade, the language and emphasis has changed. Although no country challenged Canadian sovereignty directly in the late 1990s, Colonel Pierre Leblanc, the commander of Canadian Forces Northern Area (now Joint Task Force North), began to doubt Canada’s military capability to deal with this possibility. Rob Huebert embraced the cause and tirelessly promoted his Canadian “sovereignty on thinning ice” thesis: climate change would invite foreign attempts to undermine our control over and ownership of our Arctic.¹⁷ Disputes with Denmark over Hans Island and the United States over the Beaufort Sea and Northwest Passage were held up as prime examples of conflicts with our circumpolar neighbors. By coupling these “sovereignty” issues with the uncertainty surrounding climate change, commentators demanded a stronger Canadian Forces *presence* to address new sovereignty, security, and safety issues in a rapidly changing and allegedly volatile Arctic world.

The debate over sovereignty remained largely academic until it intersected with more popular perceptions about competition for Arctic resources. Record lows in the extent of summer sea ice, combined with record high

oil prices and uncertainty over maritime boundaries (pushed to the fore by the Russian underwater flag-planting at the North Pole), conspired to drive Arctic issues to the forefront of international politics in 2007. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) estimated that the region holds 13 per cent of the undiscovered oil and 30 per cent of the undiscovered natural gas in the world. Commentators held up the absence of an Antarctic-like treaty and the U.S. failure to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as evidence that the region lacked stable governance. In the popular imagination, the Arctic remained a vast *terra nullius*. Canada had allegedly fallen behind in a “race for resources,” and nationalists demanded urgent action to defend its final frontier from outside aggressors. A similar message gained traction in Russia, conflating identity politics, national interests, the delimitation of the continental shelf, energy security, mineral resources, and security and control over Arctic jurisdictions.

A Race for Resources – or Sensible Northern Economic Development?

Russian authorities, mirroring views commonly expressed in Canada, emphasize the decisive role that the Arctic will play in their country’s economic development and global competitiveness. According to President Dmitri Medvedev, the Arctic provides 20 per cent of Russian GDP and 22 per cent of Russian exports. Intense interest in the oil and gas reserves in the region has been fueled by the Russian economy’s heavy reliance on energy extraction, of which the Arctic’s share – particularly the resources of the continental shelf – is expected to grow. The USGS report expected that more than 60 per cent of the undiscovered oil and gas reserves in the Arctic will be on Russian territory or within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Strategic reserves of metals and minerals like copper, cobalt, nickel, gold, and diamonds add to Russia’s high stakes in Arctic resource development.¹⁸

Russia’s ultimate objective is to transform the Arctic into its “foremost strategic base for natural resources” by 2020, and the Russian Security Council has assured “serious economic support” to implement the government’s Arctic policy. As a corollary, Russia intends to develop the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a wholly integrated “national transportation route” connecting Europe and Asia by 2015. This will require modern harbors,

new icebreakers, air support, and enhanced search and rescue capabilities. Prospects for development under current economic circumstances are poor, however, and experts warn that long-term sustainable growth in Russia can be achieved only with comprehensive structural reforms. Furthermore, the financial downturn and relatively low energy prices have affected investments and slowed the pace of hydrocarbon development in the Arctic.¹⁹

Although these considerations complicate the actual implementation of Russia's Arctic strategy, President Dmitry Medvedev told his security council in March 2010 that Russia must be prepared to defend its country's resources. "Regrettably, we have seen attempts to limit Russia's access to the exploration and development of the Arctic mineral resources," he said. "That's absolutely inadmissible from the legal viewpoint and unfair given our nation's geographical location and history."²⁰ These alleged "attempts to limit" are not specified but the bogeyman of outside encroachment feeds domestic anxiety. Russians are concerned about the legal process of defining the outer limits of their extended continental shelf (beyond 200 nautical miles), but Moscow is strident that the partition of the Arctic will be carried out entirely within the framework of international law. UNCLOS defines the rights and responsibilities of states in using the oceans and lays out a process for determining maritime boundaries. Littoral countries are therefore mapping the Arctic to determine the extent of their claims. Russia filed its extended continental shelf claim in 2001, but the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) told Russia to resubmit its claim before its scientific data could be considered conclusive. Accordingly, Russia is engaged in further research to bolster its claim, which includes the Lomonosov and Mendeleev ridges crossing the central Arctic Ocean.

Whereas Russia has exploited Arctic resources for decades, Canadian political rhetoric continues to promote the High Arctic as "the land of tomorrow" – a *potential* resource frontier that could melt away from Canada's control along with the sea ice. This message has been broadcast in throne speeches and government proclamations in the past four years. Prime Minister Harper proclaimed in July 2007: "Just as the new Confederation looked to securing the Western shore, Canada must now look north to the next frontier – the vast expanse of the Arctic.... More and more, as global commerce routes chart a path to Canada's North – and as the oil, gas and minerals of this frontier become more valuable – northern resource development will grow

ever more critical to our nation. I've said before that the North is poised to take a much bigger role in Canada."²¹

The following year, the Canadian government pledged to invest \$100 million over five years to map resources in the North, streamline regulatory processes so that economic development can proceed, and improve northern housing, amongst other announcements. Huebert observed "that this was one of the largest budget allocations for northern expenditures in Canadian history."²²

The government's "use it or lose it" mantra serves as a justification for Canada to assert control over its Arctic lands and waters. In terms of the extended continental shelf, Canadian commentators often paint the Russians (along with the U.S. and the Danes) as challengers to Canada's claim, spreading popular misconceptions about the process and alleging that the Arctic is a "lawless frontier." Canada ratified UNCLOS in 2003 and has ten years to submit evidence for its extended continental shelf. The 2004 federal budget announced \$69 million for seabed surveying and mapping, and the government allocated another \$20 million in 2007 to complete the research by the deadline. Critics suggest that Canada lacks the icebreaking capacity to meet this timeline, while government officials insist that Canada will submit its claims to the CLCS on schedule.

What is the real cause for alarm? Are Russian interests antithetical to Canada's? Initial Canadian concerns about Russia related to continental shelf claims, particularly the Lomonosov Ridge, which Canada also claims as an extension of its continental shelf. This *potential* dispute (Canada has not submitted its claim) took on heightened profile when the Russian *Arktika* expedition planted a titanium flag on the seabed at the North Pole in July 2007. "The Arctic is Russian," the bombastic Russian Duma politician and explorer Artur Chilingarov proclaimed. "We must prove the North Pole is an extension of the Russian continental shelf." Although the Russian Foreign Minister later dismissed this as a "publicity stunt" that the Kremlin had not approved, the world was quick to react. Then Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay was adamant that this "show by Russia" posed "no threat to Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic" in legal terms. "This isn't the 15th century," he quipped. "You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say 'We're claiming this territory.'"²³ Accordingly, many Canadian politicians and journalists held up Chilingarov's action as a quintessential

example of Russian belligerence, one that highlighted an abject disregard for due process and international law.

While these events received significant attention in the press, this narrative was not echoed in official bilateral statements, all of which emphasized cooperation, collaboration, and shared interests. In July 2006, Prime Minister Harper and President Putin issued a joint policy statement reaffirming that the countries are “neighbours in the vastness of the North and we share a deep commitment to the welfare of our Arctic communities.” Through partnership in the Arctic Council and bilateral channels, the countries pledged to “continue to work together toward sound and sustainable Northern development, balancing environmental protection with economic prosperity.”²⁴ In December 2007, Harper and Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov pledged to cooperate on Arctic economic opportunities, search and rescue, marine pollution control, and mapping of their respective continental shelves. Both countries agreed on the need for science to support their claims.²⁵ The following May, the declaration of the Arctic littoral states (the “Arctic five”) at the Ministerial Conference in Ilulissat, Greenland, reaffirmed that all would adhere to the “extensive international legal framework” that applied to the Arctic Ocean. The declaration reinforced that the Arctic was not a lawless frontier, and sovereignties were compatible under international law. Rather than anticipating an Arctic race or arbitration by force of arms, the Ilulissat declaration promised “the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims.”²⁶

This line of argument resonates with both Canadian and Russian policy statements that promote circumpolar cooperation. The Russian Arctic strategy, approved in September 2008, prioritizes maintaining the Arctic “as an area of peace and cooperation.” Russian ambassador-at-large Anton Vasilyev, a high-ranking participant in the Arctic Council, insists that “media assessments of possible aggression in the Arctic, even a third world war, are seen as extremely alarmist and provocative: In my opinion, there are no grounds for such alarmism.”²⁷ Foreign Affairs Minister Cannon began to articulate a similar position in his Whitehorse speech on March 11, 2009, when he acknowledged that geological research and international law – not military clout – would resolve boundary disputes. His statement emphasized collaboration and cooperation. “The depth and complexity of the challenges facing the Arctic are significant, and we recognize the importance of addressing many of these issues by working with our neighbours – through the Arctic Council, other multilateral institutions and our bilateral partnerships,”

Cannon expressed. “Strong Canadian leadership in the Arctic will continue to facilitate good international governance in the region.”²⁸ Canada’s long-awaited northern strategy, released that July, reaffirmed that the process for determining Canada’s continental shelf, “while lengthy, is not adversarial and is not a race.” Indeed, bilateral relations with Russia on trade, transportation, environmental protection, and indigenous issues were cast in positive terms.²⁹

Potential Conflict in the Arctic

A parallel discourse, however, continues to suggest that the circumpolar Arctic is volatile. Huebert insists that Moscow’s political strategy is “an iron fist in a velvet glove,” pointing to Russia’s “escalatory” military activities in the North and around the world: the war in Chechnya, strategic bomber flights in the Arctic, missile test-firings near the North Pole, nuclear submarine cruises in the region, and commitments to expand land force activities.³⁰ Russia’s bold military re-modernization plans appear to be part of Putin’s ambitious agenda to correct the devastating state of its armed forces after the end of the Cold War. Are these events evidence that the Russian bear has emerged from its post-Cold War hibernation, seeking to re-assert its power and anticipating an Arctic conflict?

In 2001, the Russian government endorsed an Arctic policy document linking all types of activities in the region to national security and defense interests. Russia’s Northern Fleet, the largest and most powerful component of its navy, is based on the Kola Peninsula. With the weakening of Russia’s conventional forces, nuclear deterrence (and particularly sea-based nuclear forces) has grown in importance and assumed a high priority in military modernization efforts. At the same time, political scientist Katarzyna Zysk observes, “old patterns in Russian approaches to security in the High North are visible in the way other actors in the region are viewed through lenses of a classical *Realpolitik*.” Russian elites continue to view the United States and NATO as threats to Russian security and perceive a “broad anti-Russian agenda among America and its allies, aimed at undermining Russia’s positions in the region.” The West’s growing interest in the Arctic feeds suspicions that rival powers may seek to constrain and even dispossess Russia of its rights.³¹ “If we do not take action now, we will lose precious time,” Secretary

of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev warned in 2008, “and later in the future it will be simply too late – they will drive us away from here.”³² This Russian logic is remarkably similar to the “use it or lose it” message emanating from Canada.

Although Russian statements do not anticipate a large-scale military confrontation in the region, strategic documents raise the possibility that international competition could result in small-scale confrontations related to energy resources. Accordingly, Russian authorities emphasize that a reliable military presence is essential to secure national interests. The Russian Ministry of Defense announced in July 2008 that the navy would become more active in Arctic waters, and senior officials insisted that military exercises would prepare Russian troops for combat missions if they were needed to protect the nation’s claims to the continental shelf. Despite this harsh Russian rhetoric, Zysk concludes, it is unlikely that Russia would push for military confrontation in the Arctic. Demonstrations of military force would work against the normal legal resolution of Russia’s claim to its extended continental shelf, and geography dictates that Russia has the most to gain if the process unfolds according to international law. Furthermore, “one of the region’s biggest assets as a promising site for energy exploration and maritime transportation is stability,” Zysk observes. “As the report to the WEU Assembly on High North policies stated in November 2008, given the economic importance of the Arctic to Russia it is likely that leaders will avoid actions that might undermine the region’s long-term stability and security.”³³

Canadian reactions to Russian activities would suggest a different reading of the Russian threat. Are renewed Russian military overflights and the July 2008 decision to send warships into Arctic waters (for the first time in decades) indications of nefarious intentions? The flight of two Russian military aircraft close to Canadian airspace on the eve of President Barak Obama’s visit to Canada in February 2009 is a prime example. National Defence Minister Peter McKay explained that two CF-18 fighters were scrambled to intercept the Russian aircraft and “send a strong signal that they [the Russians] should back off and stay out of our airspace.” Prime Minister Harper echoed that: “I have expressed at various times the deep concern our government has with increasingly aggressive Russian actions around the globe and Russian intrusion into our airspace. We will defend our airspace.”³⁴

To Russian spokespersons, this tough talk seemed misplaced. News agencies in Russia reported that “the statements from Canada’s defence ministry

are perplexing to say the least and cannot be called anything other than a farce.”³⁵ Dmitry Trofimov, the head of the Russian embassy’s political section in Ottawa, insisted that there was no intrusion on Canadian national airspace or sovereignty and “from the point of international law, nothing happened, absolutely nothing.” The countries adjacent to the flight path had received advanced notification, and this scheduled air patrol flight did not deviate from similar NATO practices just beyond Russian airspace.³⁶ Georgiy Mamedov, the Russian ambassador to Canada, confessed that he had “a hard time explaining this bizarre outburst to Moscow.”³⁷

The tough rhetoric persists. Canadian politicians reacted sharply when Russia stated its intention to drop paratroopers at the North Pole in the spring of 2010. While a Russian embassy spokesman insisted that the mission was a “solely symbolic” event aimed at celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of a Cold War achievement by two Soviet scientists, Defence Minister MacKay was emphatic that Canada was going to “protect our sovereign territory. We’re always going to meet any challenge to that territorial sovereignty, and I can assure you any country that is approaching Canadian airspace, approaching Canadian territory, will be met by Canadians.” The language was peculiar, given that the Russians had expressed no intention of encroaching on Canadian “territory.”³⁸ Similar rhetoric about “standing up for Canada” followed the CF-18 interception of Russian *Tu-95 Bear* bombers off the east coast of Canada in July 2010, once again outside of Canadian airspace. Journalists and military analysts immediately tied the issue to Arctic sovereignty and security, casting the Russians in the familiar role of provocateurs attempting to violate Canada’s jurisdiction.

Ironically, while Canadian politicians and commentators have been quick to accuse the Russians of militarizing the Arctic agenda, the tempo of Canada’s military activities has increased significantly over the last decade, matched by major commitments to invest in northern defenses. The Canadian navy resumed Arctic operations in 2002, and the military initiated enhanced sovereignty operations to remote parts of its archipelago that same year. These exercises are now carried out annually. Sovereignty and security has become intertwined in political rhetoric and strategic documents, beginning with the Liberal government’s *Defence Policy Statement* (2005) and the Conservatives’ *Canada First Defence Strategy* (2008) and *Northern Strategy* (2009). Internationally, Canada finds itself cast in the unfamiliar role of a

catalyst for militarizing the region, staging “Cold War-style exercises” just like the Russians.³⁹

The North was a key component of the Conservatives’ 2005 election platform, which played on the idea of an Arctic sovereignty “crisis” demanding decisive action. Stephen Harper indicated during his election campaign that Canada would acquire the military capabilities necessary to defend its sovereignty against external threats: “The single most important duty of the federal government is to defend and protect our national sovereignty.... It’s time to act to defend Canadian sovereignty. A Conservative government will make the military investments needed to secure our borders. You don’t defend national sovereignty with flags, cheap election rhetoric, and advertising campaigns. You need forces on the ground, ships in the sea, and proper surveillance. And that will be the Conservative approach.”⁴⁰ His political message emphasized the need for Canadian action with a particular emphasis on conventional military forces, differentiating his government from the Liberals whom he believed had swung the pendulum too far towards diplomacy and human development. Harper was going to swing it back towards defense and resource development and enforce Canada’s sovereign rights.

Since assuming office in 2006, Harper has made the CF the centerpiece of his government’s “use it or lose it” approach to the Arctic. This fits within the *Canada First Defence Strategy* vision that pledges to defend Canada’s “vast territory and three ocean areas” through increased defense spending and larger forces.⁴¹ Naval patrols, over-flights, effective surveillance capabilities, and boots on the ground are identified as tools that Canada will use to defend its northern claims. A spate of commitments to invest in military capabilities – from Arctic patrol vessels to new military units – reinforces the Harper government’s emphasis on “hard security” rather than “human security” like its predecessors. The prime minister explained on February 23, 2007: “We believe that Canadians are excited about the government asserting Canada’s control and sovereignty in the Arctic. We believe that’s one of the big reasons why Canadians are excited and support our plan to rebuild the Canadian Forces. I think it’s practically and symbolically hugely important, much more important than the dollars spent. And I’m hoping that years from now, Canada’s Arctic sovereignty, military and otherwise, will be, frankly, a major legacy of this government.”⁴² The logic holds that Canadians are interested in Arctic sovereignty, which makes it a useful issue to generate voter support

for defense. This formulation offers little political incentive to downplay the probability of military conflict in the Arctic.

The Harper government, like the Russians, is trying to project an image of northern resolve. Ironically, both countries accuse the other of militarizing the Arctic agenda. This may represent a classic case of the liberal security dilemma – states misperceive each other’s intentions and, in striving to be defensively secure, others perceive their actions as threatening. On the other hand, this may be a simple case of political theater in the high Arctic, staged by politicians on both sides of the Arctic Ocean to convince their domestic constituencies that they are protecting vital national interests – yet another convenient pretext to justify major investments in defense.

Canada–Russia Cooperation

In an April 2009 plea for “why the bear and the beaver should make nice together,” Carleton University political scientist Piotr Dutkiewicz lamented that, while the United States had declared its intention to “press the reset button” and enhance its working relationship with Russia, and the European Union was talking with Moscow about energy, security, environmental, and economic interests, Canada’s government was “resurrect[ing] Cold War phantoms and scar[ing] children with tales of Russian bombers and reincarnated KGB troops storming Ottawa from the Arctic.” Ottawa had dropped its Russian programs through the Canadian International Development Agency and cut its “only viable student and academic mobility program that permitted Russians and Canadians to collaborate in areas ranging from Arctic research to NGO co-operation.” Fortunately, the Canadian business community remained “ahead of its political leadership in understanding the Canada–Russia opportunity” and bilateral trade continued to grow.⁴³

If the probability of a Russia–Canada confrontation over Arctic boundaries and resources is remote, what shared interests might political leadership in both countries seek to pursue collaboratively? The idea of an “Arctic bridge” linking Eurasian and North American markets certainly remains attractive as a means to promote trade in natural resources and agricultural produce. In 2007, for example, the first inbound shipment of fertilizer from northwestern Russia arrived in Churchill, Manitoba, and both countries have emphasized plans to expand and diversify the shipments using this route.

More generally, safe and competitive maritime traffic through Arctic waters will require addressing significant gaps in marine governance and research, as demonstrated by groundings of fuel supply and passenger vessels in the Northwest Passage in 2010. Both countries continue to work through international organizations (particularly the IMO) to support a mandatory polar code, harmonize safety and pollution regulations, and develop a cooperative Arctic Search and Rescue instrument with the other Arctic states through the Arctic Council.

Canada can also find solace in the fact that Russia is the only Arctic littoral state that does not officially challenge its position on the legal status of the Northwest Passage. Indeed, Canada stands to learn from Russia's experience in managing their Northern Shipping Route. Most careful commentators note that the NSR will be a more attractive option for commercial vessels interested in Arctic transit over the next few decades, and Canada is advantageously positioned to study scientific research and implementation issues related to polar transits, including navigational requirements, pollution standards, emergency facilities, and fees.⁴⁴ These "lessons learned" will help Canada devise its own management regime when its archipelagic waters become attractive and economically viable for commercial transit traffic.

Russian spokespersons have also indicated that the countries should work cooperatively to "freeze out" non-Arctic states who may seek to encroach on their sovereign rights. "Those like Canada and Russia who have access to [the] Arctic ... they seem to have a better understanding of how to do it collectively," Sergey Petrov, the acting chief of the Russian embassy in Ottawa, told reporters in July 2009. "But there's some outside players [later identified as the European Union and its members] that want to be involved, and they're putting some oil on the flame of this issue." He reiterated that it was not in the interests of Canada or Russia to involve states that did not border the Arctic Ocean in establishing extended continental shelf boundaries and other UNCLOS-related matters.⁴⁵ In this regard, the March 2010 meeting of the Arctic-Five in Chelsea, Quebec – which the U.S. and Canadian media criticized for not including Iceland, Sweden, Finland, or the permanent participants – was applauded in the Russian media. Containing the state-centered dialog on issues related to national jurisdictions and resources may be appropriate until continental shelf claims are settled. This does not undermine the Arctic Council, as critics allege, as long as the agenda is confined to boundaries and sovereign rights under UNCLOS.

Canada and Russia can reiterate the message to the Arctic community that they have shared interests in a stable, secure, and sustainable circumpolar world. As mentioned earlier, working with Russia to address its northern challenges was a key component of the Liberal government's *Northern Dimension of Canada's Foreign Policy*. This is echoed in Conservative government actions, such as the 2007 Joint Statement on Canada–Russia Economic Cooperation and the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development concerning cooperation on aboriginal and northern development.⁴⁶ Canada and Russia should continue to reaffirm their bilateral agreements on cooperation in the Arctic and the North,⁴⁷ based on their continuing desire for partnership to serve the interests of northerners. Priority areas should remain economic development, Arctic contaminants, Aboriginal issues, resource development, geology, tourism, and health. The governments should facilitate continued contact between government representatives, aboriginal organizations, other NGOs, scientists, and business associations and firms. INAC's Circumpolar Liaison Directorate should remain the lead federal coordinator for implementation of this agreement. Canadian Inuit groups have been strong proponents of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), encouraging Canada to help their Aboriginal peoples tackle environment development challenges and supporting Aboriginal representation at the national and international levels.⁴⁸ Although modest technical assistance initiatives designed to share best practices (such as the Institutional Building for Northern Aboriginal Peoples in Russia program, which is continuing under a modest northern development stream, and the Canada–Russia Northern Development Partnership Program funded by the Canadian International Development Agency) may not enjoy a strong political or media profile, Russians perceive them as constructive initiatives and they contribute to regional and local Aboriginal entrepreneurship, as well as improved regional governance systems.⁴⁹

“Russia's Arctic opening is a huge challenge with tremendous strategic, commercial, and environmental ramifications,” Charles Emmerson recently summarized in *Foreign Policy*. “It is also an opportunity do things right.”⁵⁰ The same conclusion can be drawn about Canada, offering possibilities for stronger bilateral cooperation. Despite both countries' commitments to resource development, balancing economic prosperity with environmental

protection and improved living conditions for northern peoples remain significant challenges. Fortunately, for all the high-level political and media talk of conflict, bilateral relations at the working group level remain positive.⁵¹ The prospects for enhanced partnerships on policy areas of common concern are strong, despite strong rhetoric from each country accusing the other of militarizing the Arctic agenda and destabilizing the region.

Conclusions

In late April 2010, Canada's Chief of the Maritime Staff, Admiral Dean McFadden, explained that the Canadian Forces do not anticipate an armed standoff over Arctic resources. Economic interests should not lead to the militarization of the North, he emphasized, and the real challenges relate to safety and security – an environmental spill, search and rescue, and climate change causing distress to communities. The role of the Canadian Forces is to support other government departments, not to lead Canada's charge in a military showdown.⁵² This reassuring message is more frequently echoed at the political level. For example, Minister Cannon told a Moscow audience on September 15, 2010, that Canada “look[s] forward to working with our Arctic partners to advance shared priorities and to address common challenges to fulfill our vision of the Arctic as a region of stability, where Arctic states work to foster sustainable development, as well as to exercise enlightened stewardship for those at the heart of our Arctic foreign policy – Northerners.”⁵³

International newspaper commentators suggest that the world is not registering these rational and reasonable messages. Timothy Bancroft-Hinchey's article in *Pravda* is an extreme example: “What does Prime Minister Stephen Harper have in common with the Canadian Minister of Defence? He shares a sinister, hypocritical and belligerent discourse bordering on the lunatic fringe of the international community... From Canada, Russia has become used to seeing and hearing positions of sheer arrogance, unadulterated insolence and provocative intrusion.... What these statements hide is Canada's nervousness at the fact that international law backs up Russia's claim to a hefty slice of the Arctic and that international law will favour Russia in delineating the new Arctic boundaries.”⁵⁴ Is Canada belligerent, even lunatic, megalomaniacal, arrogant, insolent, provocative, and insecure about its claims? Ironically,

this harsh characterization of Canada is a mirror image of the way that some muckraking journalists in the Western world characterize talk about Russia.

Sovereignty and security are compatible in the circumpolar world. So is cooperation and competition. The dance between Canada and Russia over Arctic issues, rich in mixed messaging, can serve the complex political interests of both parties if it is carefully choreographed. Both governments have indicated their desires to revitalize their military forces. This requires national will, and Russian and Canadian politicians are tapping into identity politics associated with the Arctic to justify investments in military capabilities for defense of sovereignty. In this sense, rhetorical jousting serves political interests in both countries, and the primary audiences are domestic.

It is shared interests in, and commitments to, international law that make this a safe political dance. Both countries can point to one another as provocateurs with relative certainty that neither will use force to undermine the other's sovereign rights in the region. There is little likelihood that the continental shelf delimitation process will lead to military intimidation or confrontation. (The 2010 Russia–Norway agreement in the Barents Sea sets the standard for peaceful resolution of contentious issues.⁵⁵) The downside is that this political theater could inhibit cooperation between two Arctic states that share many common interests in the region. Given geographical realities, both countries have the most to gain from an orderly process that creates a stable environment for resource development and safe shipping through Arctic waters. They also have common interests in ensuring that non-Arctic littoral states and organizations do not encroach on resource rights or jurisdictions to which Canada and Russia are entitled under international law.

Both nations' Arctic policy documents assert their status as leading Arctic powers, but rhetorical and material investments in "hard security" must be situated within broader Arctic discourses and policies. It is unlikely that Canada and Russia will be close friends, given historical mistrust, geopolitical interests in other parts of the world, and lingering questions about their respective motives. This does not preclude opportunities for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the Arctic. The challenge is cutting through the mixed messaging emanating from government officials. Careful stage-managing might continue to produce political theater that sustains national will to implement military plans, but it could also reinforce broader Arctic strategies that balance defense, diplomacy, and development for Canada and Russia alike.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this chapter was published in *International Journal* 65, no. 4 (2010): 879–97. Reprinted with permission of the Canadian International Council.
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- 4 See, for example, Rob Huebert, *The Newly Emerging Arctic Security Environment* (Calgary: Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, 2010); Scott Borgerson, “Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 2 (March/April 2008): 63–77.
- 5 Zysk, “Russia and the High North,” 106.
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- 7 The author thanks Jennifer Arthur, Rob Huebert, Stéphane Roussel, Ron Wallace, and Katarzyna Zysk for their valuable comments on an earlier version, first published in *International Journal* 65, no. 4 (2010): 879–97 (reprinted with permission of the Canadian International Council), as well as the ArcticNet project on The Emerging Arctic Security Environment for research support.
- 8 John McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8–9, *passim*.
- 9 See, for example, P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Matthew Farish, “The Cold War on Canadian Soil: Militarizing a Northern Environment,” *Environmental History* 12, no. 3 (2007): 920–50.
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 - 30 Quoted in Randy Boswell, “Polar posturing: Canada, Russia tensions in Arctic part politics, experts say,” *Calgary Herald*, October 19, 2009. Also, see R. Wallace, Op-Ed Review. Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute: *Canada’s Re-Emerging Arctic Imperative: The Iron Fist in an Arctic Mitt?* <http://www.cdfai.org/PDF/R.%20Wallace%20op-ed%20on%20Huebert%20Arctic%20paper.pdf>. 20 March 2010.
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 - 33 Zysk, “Geopolitics in the Arctic,” 9.
 - 34 Quoted in Allan Woods, “‘Back off and stay out of our airspace,’ Russia,” *Toronto Star*, February 28, 2009.
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- 54 Timothy Bancroft-Hinchey, "Climate Change, the Arctic and Russia's National Security," *Pravda*, March 25, 2010; <http://>

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- 55 In April 2010, Russia and Norway resolved a forty-year disagreement over the division of the Barents Sea. To optimists, this agreement signaled the appropriateness of efforts to promote a secure, stable region characterized by international cooperation and responsible resource exploration. Cajoling Canada to take note of this landmark resolution, Sergei Lavrov and Jonas Gahr Støre (the Russian and

Norwegian foreign ministers respectively) noted that “the Law of the Sea provided a framework that allowed us to overcome the zero-sum logic of competition and replace it with a process focused on finding a win-win solution. We hope that the agreement will inspire other countries in their attempts to resolve their maritime disputes, in the High North and elsewhere, in a way that avoids conflict and strengthens international co-operation.” Sergei Lavrov and Jonas Gahr Støre, “Canada, take note: Here’s how to resolve maritime disputes,” *Globe and Mail*, September 21, 2010.