Canada to greatly expand its military presence in the Arctic

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Canada's new Conservative government is committed to a major expansion and rearmament of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) including: the addition of 13,000 regular troops and 10,000 reservists, a C$5.3 billion increase in military spending over the next five years, and the development of an increased rapid deployment capacity that would enable greater Canadian participation in military interventions overseas.

A further key Conservative priority is to equip the CAF so it can have a much larger presence in the Arctic and thereby back up and enforce Canada's claim to a vast swathe of territory, strategic sea lanes and underwater resources in the far north.

Speaking in the final days of the election campaign that resulted in his becoming prime minister, Conservative leader Stephen Harper declared, "I've made no secret of our desire to rebuild the Canadian military to have the capacities of a sovereign nation.... To make foreign policy decisions that are not only independent but are actually noticed by other powers around the world."

Harper's statement that he wants "other powers around the world" to take notice of Canada is all the more remarkable in that the previous Liberal government ratcheted up military spending after US President Bush proclaimed that the September 2001 terrorist attacks marked the beginning of the first war of the twenty-first century and repeatedly deployed the Canadian Armed Forces overseas. The Canadian military played a major role in NATO's 1998 bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, has participated since the fall of 2001 in the US conquest and occupation of Afghanistan, and occupied Port-au-Prince airport in February-March 2004 as part of the foreign-orchestrated coup that deposed Haiti's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

In a deployment planned under the Liberal government of Paul Martin, the CAF raised its troop strength in Afghanistan to more than 2,000 this month and has assumed leadership of a NATO force based in Kandahar that is charged with mounting counter-insurgency operations against the Taliban.

The Conservatives—and in this they are supported by much of Canadian big business—support greater Canadian participation in US-led military actions and greater integration of the Canadian and US militaries.

Yet the Canadian ruling class, which has sharp differences with the US on a variety of trade and territorial/jurisdictional issues, by no means sees this as a one-way street. While Canada's elite is quite ready to deploy CAF troops in Afghanistan, thereby freeing up US personnel for use in Iraq, and to accommodate Washington on other matters such as the Ballistic Missile Defense program, it is pressing for reciprocal concessions on other matters such as Canada's claim to sovereignty in the Arctic.

To the media's great surprise, Harper chose to end his first press conference as prime minister by reasserting—and not in answer to any question—Canada's territorial claims to the Arctic and Arctic waters.

It may be recalled that last summer, the Liberal government engaged in a war of words with Denmark over Hans Island, a tiny, desolate outcropping of rock and ice off the coast of Greenland. It is now evident that that incident heralded a renewed commitment on the part of Canadian capital to stake its authority in the far north and to send a message to its rivals to that effect.

While the Martin Liberals had spoken of the need for an increased Canadian presence in the Arctic to reinforce Canada's claims, the Conservatives made Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic a major issue in the election campaign. Calls for an increased CAF Arctic military capacity were an important part of the Conservatives' defense/foreign policy and northern development policy planks.

To make good on its promise for greater Canadian control of the Arctic and its waters, the Tories have laid out plans to station three armed icebreakers in the region, build a deep-water submarine base, deploy remote control aerial drones and establish a network of underwater listening posts for surveillance of foreign vessels.

The Canadian military is highly supportive of the increased role that is being proposed for it in the far north. Next month, the CAF will launch a "sovereignty mission" in Canada's Arctic with the mobilization of five armed patrols on snowmobile in a highly visible bid to assert Canadian authority over the region. Though relatively small in numbers, the mobilization has symbolic significance and is regarded as but a first step in expanding a military presence in the region. Along with innovations in coordinating communications and military transport in the north, the teams will begin to restore functionality to equipment and facilities that have been neglected, in some cases, for years.

Behind the scramble to assert Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic lies ecological and geo-political changes—the combination of global warming and increased frictions between states as they vie for resources and geo-political advantage in an ever-more-competitive world capitalist economy.

There is mounting evidence that the process of global warming has meant a significant melting of the polar ice caps. While raising

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the possibility of an ecological catastrophe, it is viewed by business and government as offering new opportunities for capitalist exploitation.

Aside from the prospect of increased access to new fishing stocks and mineral resources, particularly oil and gas, the warming of Arctic waters means the very real possibility in the near future of a navigable channel through the Arctic—a northwest passage—at least through the summer months. This would represent an enormous savings for international shipping companies, which could cut 4,000 to 5,000 miles off their current routes. In the case of the increasingly important super-tankers, which are too massive to pass through the Panama Canal and must travel around the tip of South America, a northwest passage would provide an even greater advantage.

For these reasons, as well as to counter any suggestions from Washington that Canada is not doing its utmost to secure the borders of North America, the Canadian ruling class sees control of the Arctic as pivotal to its economic and geo-political ambitions. Control over the North American Arctic is perceived to be offer Canada a strategic position of increasing value in its dealings with its major trading rivals and in particular the United States, which is a player in the Arctic not only by virtue of its global reach, but because of Alaska.

As stated above, Harper surprised the press when he raised, without prompting, the Canada-US dispute over the Arctic in his first press conference as prime minister.

The previous day, in reply to a question, the US Ambassador to Canada, David Wilkins, had told a university forum in London, Ontario, that Washington does not recognize Canada's claim that the northwest passage is an internal Canadian waterway. Wilkins's reply was a stock restatement of a longstanding US position: "We agree to disagree. We don't recognize Canada's claims to the waters."

Harper's declamation on this issue—while also a repetition of the standard Canadian claim—was nonetheless extraordinary for its timing and harshness. Rejecting Wilkins's statement, he affirmed, "We have significant plans for national defense and for defense of our sovereignty, including the Arctic" and, to press the point, "It is the Canadian people we get our mandate from, not the ambassador from the United States."

Harper's sensational statement occasioned considerable press head-scratching as to its purpose. Some pundits suggested it was an attempt by Harper to counter criticism from the Liberals and the social democrats of the New Democratic Party (NDP) that his government is too cozy with the Bush administration. By demonstratively "standing up" to Washington on this issue, it would make it easier for the Conservatives to move closer to the US in other areas, or so the argument went.

There is probably some truth to this, as also to the claim that the US would not necessarily look unfavorably on an increased Canadian military presence in the Arctic, since it has long been a complaint of Washington that Canada does not sufficiently share the cost of militarily policing the north.

Nevertheless, the dispute between Canada and the US over jurisdiction in the Arctic is real and the stakes in geo-political and monetary terms are substantial. And it is just one of a growing number of Canada-US disputes.

As a neo-conservative ideologue and self-professed admirer of the US neo-conservative movement, Harper is a political bedfellow of George W. Bush. He and his party viewed the failure of the previous Liberal government to sanction Canadian participation in the invasion of Iraq to be a major mistake, because it lost credit with the Bush administration that could have useful to Canada's elite in resolving the softwood lumber and other trade disputes and because they believe that the Canadian elite needs to have a "seat at the table" in the reordering of the world so as to secure its interests.

Harper's choice of one of the most vocal supporters of Canadian participation in the Iraq War—former Bay Street player and Progressive Conservative finance minister Michael Wilson—as Canada's new ambassador to the US, was unquestionably a signal to the Bush administration that the new Conservative government will be more supportive than its Liberal predecessor of the US's foreign/geo-political strategy.

But the increasingly aggressive military and economic posture the US has assumed in attempting to offset its relative economic decline and the Canadian ruling class's own predatory interests and ambitions preclude any easy resolution of Canada-US frictions.

In terms of settling the Arctic territorial/jurisdictional dispute, it is evident that the issue will not be decided strictly on its legal merits, if at all. The two countries formally agreed to disagree in a pact signed in 1988. Officially, the US only recognizes the international 12-mile offshore territorial limit, while Canada claims sovereignty over the entire Arctic region north of its mainland. In 1994, the two countries signed on to the International Law of the Sea Convention (ILSC), which also codified a 200-mile economic zone. And while the Americans have in the past agreed to seek Canadian consent for use of the passage, during the Canadian election reports emerged of a US submarine deployed in the Arctic without notification to Canadian authorities. It seems inevitable then that tension over control of the Arctic will be of a protracted character and will likely play an increasing role in the political maneuvers and frictions between the two countries.

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