

# Harper commits billions to build Canada an Arctic navy

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19 July 2007

In an aggressive move to bolster Canada's claims in the Arctic, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced last week the building of as many as eight Arctic patrol ships and a deep-water, Arctic Ocean port.

"Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty over the Arctic," Harper told a gathering of sailors at Canadian Forces' Base Esquimalt near Victoria, British Columbia. "Either use it or lose it. And make no mistake, this Government intends to use it."

"It is no exaggeration to say," added Harper, "that the need to assert our sovereignty and protect our territorial integrity in the North on our terms have never been more urgent."

Harper was referring to the growing geo-political importance of the Arctic. Due to global-warming, the vast mineral and energy resources of this region are become increasingly accessible. Moreover, many predict that within next half century ships will be able to make routine use of a "Northwest Passage" from the Atlantic to the Pacific, via the now ice-jammed Arctic Ocean, making control of this strategic waterway vitally important.

The Harper minority Conservative government has placed an expanded role for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) at the centre of its foreign policy, giving priority to the purchase of new armaments and to Canada's leading role in the colonial-style, counter-insurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan. Fostering stronger identification with the Arctic is also a key element in the Harper Conservatives' attempt to fashion a more robust and militarist Canadian nationalism.

The current surge in military spending began under the previous Martin Liberal government, which in 2005 pledged an additional \$13 billion in funding to the military over five years. The Harper Tories have accelerated and added to that commitment. In the current fiscal year, military expenditures are estimated to be \$16.2 billion, but by 2010 that figure is to mushroom to

\$21.5 billion.

The new Polar Class 5 Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships will be capable of cutting through ice up to one meter thick. This means the ships will be capable of traversing the "Northwest Passage" during the so-called navigable season, but in the winter months their reach will be limited to its approaches. Each patrol ship will be equipped with landing pads to carry the C-148 Cyclone helicopters that the military ordered last year, as well as an unspecified but formidable gun armament.

The ships will be designed and built in Canada, although it is not yet known where or by whom. There are at least a dozen shipyards across the country that are capable of such an undertaking. Four possible sites including Iqaluit on Frobisher Bay have been identified as suitable for the permanent deep-water port.

The cost of the new vessels, which are not expected to be operational for another eight years, will exceed \$3.1 billion and maintaining them over the next 25 years is expected to cost an additional \$4.3 billion. No figures have been given as yet for the cost of the construction and operation of the port, which will be equipped to supply, refuel and maintain the vessels.

Harper's announcement of the plan to build an Arctic patrol-boat fleet came only days after the prime minister announced the refitting of the navy's fleet of 12 frigates, at a cost over \$3 billion. In announcing that procurement, Harper stressed that the frigates will be given the necessary communications and other equipment to enable them to play the lead role in international naval expeditions.

The opposition Liberals have attacked the Conservative decision to build a fleet of Arctic-patrol boats, because it broke a Tory election promise to acquire much larger ice-breakers with the ability to break through ice as thick as 15 meters, meaning they could navigate through most of the Arctic waters that Canada claims all year-round.

Harper's announcement was nevertheless met with virtually unanimous approval from the corporate media. Significantly, the strongest endorsement coming from the paper most closely associated with the Liberal Party, the *Toronto Star*. It called the plan a "prudent" investment. Canada's military, it should be noted, strongly favored building the patrol boats rather than the large ice-breakers, because it will free up money for other procurements, like the frigates.

The press approval of Harper's plans to build an Arctic navy reflects a consensus within Canada's political and corporate establishment that action is needed to safeguard its vital interests in the far north. The *National Post* and *Globe and Mail* newspapers, which speak for the most powerful sections of big business, voiced support for the plan. But they made clear that they consider it to be but a down payment and that ultimately larger icebreakers will be necessary, so as to ensure that Canada can enforce its writ against the US and Russia, whose vessels already routinely patrol the entire Arctic.

Harper defended his abandoning of the large-icebreaker promise, saying it had been made in the heat of an election campaign. Said Harper, "We opted in the end for medium ice breakers, far more of them, and with the capability to patrol a wide range of Canadian waters."

Harper's announcement answers persistent demands from the military establishment that Canada bolster its military strength in the region under conditions where challenges to Canadian claims in north have become increasingly frequent and from a number of countries including Russia, the U.S. and even Denmark. As Harper himself stated, "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 country."

Harper's position echoes that of Jack Granatstein—a historian and prominent advocate of an expanded Canadian military, freed from what he perceives as the albatross of a public image as a "peacekeeper. In recent writings Granatstein underscores that it is not merely a matter of national pride that Canada be able to monitor its northern reaches, but a vital "national interest" since "the Arctic might be the next Alberta." Untapped oil reserves in the Arctic are estimated by the U.S. Geological Survey to be up to 50 billion barrels, or one quarter of the world's remaining undiscovered deposits.

The issue of the Arctic has been used by Harper to counter charges that his policies are too closely aligned

with the White House. It may be remembered that in one of his first public statements after taking office last year, Harper openly challenged the U.S. over the issue of Arctic sovereignty and has since used it to counter the public perception that he is a toady the Bush administration, particularly as regards the ever more unpopular war in Afghanistan.

At the same time, there are real and longstanding issues in dispute between Canada and the US over control of the Arctic Ocean region. Canada claims territorial rights over an Arctic archipelago of some 19,000 islands and all adjacent waters—a claim consistently, if so far quietly, rejected by Washington. This has in turn given rise to proposals, most notably from the editors of the *National Post*, that a deal be struck whereby Canada would support U.S. foreign policy, including its wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, in exchange for Washington's recognition of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.

By taking a strong stand in support of Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic, Harper aims not only to curry favor with his anti-American opponents, but to assure that the increasingly tangible prospects for the exploitation of the vast resource wealth of that region fall to Canadian business and that Canada exerts control over the potentially vitally important Northwest Passage. Thus does Canada's corporate and political elite seek to cash in from the widespread ecological and economic devastation being wrought by global-warming and to position itself in the intensifying great-power struggle for resources and geo-political advantage.



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