

Canada's ruling elite asserts its predatory Arctic ambitions

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Mounting tensions between Canada and Russia over control of the immense natural resources of the Arctic and a potential transcontinental Arctic seaway, the Northwest Passage, have found expression in recent weeks in a series of diplomatic spats.

At the end of February, Canada's Conservative government announced that Canadian fighters had been scrambled to prevent two Russian military aircraft from penetrating Canadian airspace. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper justified the action by saying that the Russians were committing "aggression in the Arctic, aggression more generally, an aggression that is increasingly troublesome just to be troublesome." A month after the incident, at a meeting with the Russian minister for foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, Canadian Defence Minister Peter MacKay declared that "each time you send planes, we'll send planes too."

Contrary to what Harper and Mackay would have everyone believe, there is no evidence that the Russian planes ever sought to enter Canadian airspace or in any other way exceed the rights conferred on them by international law. According to US Air Force General Gene Renuart, the current head of NORAD (the joint Canadian-American aerospace defense force), "They [the Russians] have been professional in the way they have conducted their aircraft operations" and have not entered the internal airspace of any other country. That said, Russia's decision to resume regular patrols in the Arctic area for the first time since the end of the Cold War is unquestionably part of Moscow's turn to a more assertive geopolitical posture.

At the beginning of April, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon met his Russian counterpart, Lavrov, and demanded that Canada be warned each time Russia sends planes near the Canadian border. A senior official of the Russian embassy replied that Canada would have to officially propose a new treaty governing Canadian-Russian relations if it wanted Moscow to entertain such a request.

The Canadian government also reacted aggressively to the public release this March of a document signed by Russian President Dimitri Medvedev outlining Russia's Arctic strategy.

Drafted by the Russian president's security council, the document says that the Arctic should become a strategic base of prime importance to Russia and that, by 2020, the region should be Russia's primary source of natural resources. "It is necessary," says the document, "to create military units... in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation so as to ensure military security." The document adds that Moscow aims to "use the Arctic zone ... strategically, as a natural resources base, to provide for Russia's needs for fossil fuels, biological resources, water and other important strategic resources."

Canadian Foreign Minister Cannon quickly responded to the release of the Russian document, vowing that Canada would not let itself be "bullied" by Russia and would be "uncompromising" in defending its interests in the Arctic.

The increase of tensions between Canada and Russia comes in the context of melting Arctic Ocean ice, caused by global warming, and the recognition that this opens up immense new business and geo-political opportunities for the rival imperialist powers.

According to some estimates, the Arctic region could contain 25 percent of the global petroleum and natural gas reserves that still remain to be discovered. Because of the melting of Arctic ice, which is taking place much more rapidly than anticipated, the natural resources that lie under Arctic waters are becoming more and more accessible.

In an interview published on the website of NATO, Soren Grade, the defense minister of Denmark, another country with significant Arctic interests because of its possession of Greenland, makes explicit mention of the immense possibilities opening up for the bourgeoisie: "Due to the fact there might be a lot of oil in this area, it is very high on the agenda in all nations, because actually you can be pretty rich if there is a lot of oil and it belongs to you and you want to explore it. Maybe not today when the oil barrel is \$40, but at

\$140 it could make a difference.”

The disappearing ice could also lead to the opening of new sea routes, such as the Northwest Passage, which links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. If this route were to become largely free of ice and thus navigable by oil tankers and container ships, it would considerably cheapen commerce between north-east Asia and the principal markets of Europe and America by greatly reducing travel distances.

Since coming to power, the Harper government has made one of its central themes asserting the Canadian ruling elite's interests and ambitions in the Arctic. It has announced billions of dollars in expenditures so as to develop a significant military presence in the region and acquire ice-breakers to patrol it. The construction of a new deep-water port is also envisaged, as well as new research centres.

Recently, the government launched operation Nunavut (“land that is ours” in Inuktitut) with the aim of developing Canada's military capabilities in the Arctic, such as ground and air surveillance patrols, and mapping the region, including and especially the floor of the Arctic Ocean.

In August 2008, Ottawa announced an investment of 100 million dollars over 5 years in the cartography of the Far North. In addition to providing information on the energy potential of the region, the mapping of the Far North will enable Ottawa to better support its jurisdictional claims over Arctic waters, which are to be adjudicated, along with those of the other Arctic Ocean states, by the United Nations beginning in 2013.

According to the United Nations' Law of the Sea convention, every state has exclusive economic exploitation rights over natural resources found within 200 nautical miles (370 km) of its coasts, and can claim a further 150 nautical miles if it can be proven that the ocean floor up to this distance is an extension of a continental shelf. On this basis, Russia, which planted a flag in the middle of the Arctic Ocean in 2007, claims control over 37 percent of the waters and seabed of the Arctic Ocean.

Canada's aggressive response to Russia's Arctic thrust has a double-purpose. It is meant to directly assert the ambitions of Canada's capitalist rulers to a major share of the energy and mineral wealth of the Arctic. It is also aimed at indirectly advancing those ambitions by courting favour with the United States.

Ottawa wants to demonstrate to Washington that it can be a reliable ally in the Arctic and indeed that US efforts to block a resurgent Russia can be furthered by supporting Canada's claims in the Arctic, including exclusive control over the Northwest Passage.

However, there are longstanding tensions and frictions between Canada and the United States over the Arctic. With

their own interests in mind, the United States has rejected Canada's claim to the Northwest Passage, insisting that these waters should be under international control, that is a sea-route open to all comers. There are also tensions between Canada and the United States regarding the division of the Beaufort Sea north of Alaska and the Yukon. The Beaufort Sea contains significant energy resources.

Besides Canada, a number of other lesser powers covet the resources of the Arctic. The Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland) have proposed a “declaration of solidarity” that is to be discussed and ratified by their foreign affairs ministers later this month. The declaration is supposed to serve as the basis for the development of an Arctic security-defence pact.

Regarding the fact that Russia is modernising its army with the aim of better defending its interests in the far north, Jonas Gahr Store, Norway's minister of foreign affairs, said: “We don't see this primarily as something directed towards a single group of countries or a single country. But it is a way for Russia to bring back their presence. We have to follow that very carefully and we have to respond I think accordingly.”

In another sign of mounting tensions between the great and lesser powers over the control of Arctic resources, NATO has declared that it intends to expand its military presence in the region. At a meeting at the end of January in Reykjavik, Iceland, the General Secretary of NATO, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer declared: “I would be the last one to expect military conflict—but there will be a military presence... It should be a military presence that is not overdone, and there is a need for political cooperation and economic cooperation.”

The immense energy resources made more accessible by the melting of Arctic ice will not be used rationally to meet the energy needs of the world population. Instead, each power seeks to exploit climate change to its own advantage and to increase the profits of its bourgeoisie. Far from favouring “cooperation,” the division of the world into competing nation states leads the various powers to enter more and more openly into conflict even in this hitherto deserted and inhospitable region.



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