

# Canada’s “Northern Strategy” and the militarization of the Arctic

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Since assuming power in 2006, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper has made the assertion of Canadian capitalist interests in the Arctic region a priority. Harper has made five visits to the Arctic since taking office, including a five-day tour late last month.

The Canadian ruling elite, like those of the neighbouring Arctic Ocean coastal states, views the melting of the Polar ice cap, due in part to global warming, as an opportunity to make huge profits. Competition for control over the region’s lucrative resources has exploded in recent years.

Canada’s Far North comprises a full 40 percent of the country’s landmass. It is the site of immense energy resources, which have become increasingly accessible as the Arctic sea ice melts. The region is thought to have the equivalent of 90 billion barrels of oil and as much as a quarter of the world’s yet to be discovered oil and natural gas.

Melting of the permanent ice is also opening up a new intercontinental maritime route, the famed Northwest Passage, which by shortening the distance to be travelled between Europe and the Asian Pacific, will allow shipping companies to save substantial transportation costs. For the country that controls the Passage, this would be a highly valuable asset.

Harper’s Arctic visit was the occasion for his government to seek a rapprochement with the US, in order to promote Canadian interests in the Arctic in opposition to Russian claims in the area.

This message can be found couched in diplomatic language in the government’s *Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy*, published several days before the prime minister’s trip to the Far North. “Canada is demonstrating effective stewardship and leadership internationally,” the statement intones, “to promote a stable, rules-based Arctic region where the rights of sovereign states are respected in accordance with international law and diplomacy.”

In a remark directed against Russia, the statement identifies the United States as being the “premier partner” of Canada in the Arctic.

There are two principal reasons for Canada’s differing attitudes towards the rival great powers. First, it is expected that Canada and Russia will present conflicting conclusions to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in December 2013.

Coastal states have until December 2013 to present documentation “proving” their claims to the Arctic Ocean floor.

Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), coastal states have the right to “exclusive economic zones” covering the marine resources of the seabed and subsoil for 200 nautical miles beyond their coastal baselines. And they can lay claim to similar rights to parts of the continental shelf that extend beyond the 200 nautical-mile limit.

Both Canada and Russia are currently mapping the Arctic sea floor in order to stake their respective claims to ocean resources and it is viewed as almost a certainty that they will make overlapping and conflicting claims based on self-interested interpretations of where their continental shelves end.

Second and more fundamentally, Canada, as a second-rate power, has always had to build alliances with the great power of the day so as to assert its interests on the world stage. Thus the Canadian bourgeoisie first worked in close association with Great Britain and later with the United States, to secure a share of the world’s resources and markets.

Given that Washington has significant conflicts with Moscow, 20 years after the end of the Cold War, the Canadian ruling class sees in its powerful neighbor to the South—with which it has long maintained an economic and geopolitical partnership—a vital ally to defend and expand its interests in the Arctic under the aegis of a common struggle against Moscow. Canada also views Denmark and other NATO countries such as Norway as potential allies in jockeying for wealth and geo-political position in the Arctic.

The establishment media, exulting at the opportunity for profit in the Arctic, has for the most part supported the Conservative government’s orientation. A *Globe and Mail* editorial enthuses, “The government’s new policy statement is a salutary mixture of pragmatism and principle, which offers real hope of a more vigorous Canadian presence in the Arctic.”

But the policy is fraught with contradictions. Despite the policy paper’s claim that “Canada does not anticipate any military challenges in the Arctic,” the immensity of the natural resources coming into play is inevitably pushing both medium and great powers—including the United States, Russia, Canada, Denmark and Norway—to develop their military presence in this region.

Moreover, significant conflicts have already arisen between Canada and countries it considers to be its allies. The United States has never recognized Canada’s control over the Northwest Passage and disagrees with it over the maritime boundary in the Beaufort Sea (which lies off the northern shore of Alaska and Canada’s Yukon and Northwest Territories), an area rich in

hydrocarbons. Canada and Denmark are disputing ownership of Hans Island, strategically located between Greenland (a Danish possession) and Canada, in the middle of another potential ocean passage, the Strait of Nares.

One of Harper's important goals on his recent Arctic visit was to promote Operation Nanook, an annual Arctic military operation since 2007, destined to reinforce Canadian sovereignty in the North. For the first time, the government invited the United States and Denmark to join the military exercises. Joining the 900 soldiers of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) were 600 American and Danish soldiers. "As the strategic importance of Canada's Arctic grows," Harper stated, "the work undertaken by Operation Nanook is more valuable ... than ever before."

The military exercises are clearly directed against Russia. Defence Minister Peter MacKay recently stated that Russia will not be invited to participate in future CAF exercises in the Far North. On the eve of Harper's Arctic trip, he and his government made a fuss over the fact that two Russian military airplanes had recently approached Canadian airspace. Harper used the incident to justify his government's recent purchase of 65 F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets, at a cost of \$16 billion.

Over the past few years, Harper's government has regularly used the flights of Russian military aircraft close to Canadian airspace to point to Russia's Arctic ambitions, to curry favor with the United States, and to generate popular support for the militarization of the Arctic.

Canadian military analysts admit that Russia's Arctic ambitions are roughly similar to those of Canada. A *Globe and Mail* article by Murray Brewster explains that when analysts studied Moscow's 2008 preliminary documents on Arctic policy, "They noted that what the Russians put on paper was remarkably similar to Canada's own northern strategy," i.e., to appeal for cooperation with its Arctic partners and at the same time to make military deployments in the region.

In the past few years, Canada has announced billions of dollars in Arctic expenditures. To control and exploit the natural resources of this arid, sparsely populated region, the Canadian elite must develop its economic infrastructure. According to the government's policy statement, "Improving air and sea transportation links to create enhanced access across the polar region can help encourage Arctic trade and investment opportunities."

But the new infrastructure has a dual purpose. It also is meant to facilitate military surveillance and deployment across Canada's Far North.

Harper, on his tour of the Arctic last month, announced several new investments in the region, including the establishment of a Canadian Forces training center at Resolute Bay, one of Canada's most northern settlements, and the construction of a deep-water berthing and re-fuelling facility at Nanisivik to support an ever expanding Canadian naval presence in the Arctic. To supplement its current ice-breaking ships, "the Government is building a new Polar Class icebreaker for the North, the largest and most powerful icebreaker Canada has ever owned," states the prime minister's web site.

Other Arctic coastal countries are making similar investments.

Harper also announced that Ottawa will spend almost half a billion dollars on developing a new generation of Radarsat satellites for deployment by 2015: "From Afghanistan to the Arctic, from the coast of Somalia to the shores of Nootka Sound [on Vancouver island near where the Canadian military recently seized control of a boatload of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka], we will be able to see what the bad guys are up to."

Despite its diplomatic maneuvers, the Canadian ruling class is very conscious that, to defend its interests, it must continue to develop its military presence in the Arctic. John Ibbetson writes in the *Globe and Mail*, "With the Arctic warming and oil exploration companies salivating, borders increasingly need to become borders." Given the huge resources at stake, Ibbetson admits that diplomacy has its limits and concludes that the best way to defend Canada's interests in the Arctic is to develop and to militarize the region: "The best way to assert sovereignty is to be in the place you claim as yours."

Rob Huebert, associate director of the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, describes the military rapprochement between Canada, the United States, Denmark and Norway in a recent *Globe and Mail* op-ed piece: "For the past 20 years, none of these four states saw a need to exercise their forces in the Far North. Yet, there's now a very definitive effort by the four to have a much more powerful and co-ordinated capability in the region. They may be telling their citizens that all is well in the Arctic, but their actions suggest this is not what they truly believe. A new era of Arctic security is arriving whether or not we want to admit it."

Huebert's comments echo those made by Harper on the eve of his Arctic trip: "Clearly, we always try to work with our partners," declared Canada's prime minister, "but in the end, we are there to defend and develop our strategy, which includes investments in the military area and for the other pillars of our strategy."

Harper is careful not to state that behind these diplomatic and military initiatives with the "partners" of Canada, huge interests are moving into collision. The NATO allies, whether together or not, and Russia, will take every necessary step to defend their individual interests, with the increasing risk that mounting tensions could transform into open military conflict.



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