

Canada spearheads exploitation and militarization of the Arctic

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced new investments in infrastructure aimed at opening up the Arctic to intensified capitalist development when he conducted his eighth annual tour of the Far North last week.

He also participated in a military exercise, so as to underline his government's determination to assert "sovereignty" in the Far North through the building up of Canada's military capabilities. As has been the case in Harper's previous visits, he avoided any serious discussion of the want and deprivation that confront the aboriginal peoples who constitute the majority of the region's inhabitants. Insofar as he even acknowledged this social crisis, he held out big business resource-extraction projects as the solution.

In late May, on assuming the two-year presidency of the Arctic Council—a forum of the eight circumpolar countries—Canada served notice that it will push for a change in the Council's focus so as to seize the economic opportunities that have arisen from the rapid disappearance of the Arctic ice caps due to man-made climate change. Ice cap thinning and melting—Arctic ice levels in 2012 were almost 49 percent less than the average between 1979 and 2000—mean that the region's natural resources are far more accessible. It is also anticipated that Arctic waters, like the fabled Northwest Passage, will soon be viable for commercial shipping, which would greatly reduce travel times and shipping costs.

Founded in 1996, the Arctic Council traditionally focused on environmental and scientific questions. With the rapid melting of the ice caps opening up the possibility of immense profits for big business, however, it has become an increasingly important mechanism for trying to regulate the rival geopolitical interests of the Arctic states—Russia, Canada, the United States, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark (Greenland).

"For 16 years, the Arctic Council has concentrated on quality research," declared Canada's appointee as Arctic Council President, Conservative cabinet minister Leona Aglukkaq, at the conclusion of her maiden meeting as Council head. "But in the final analysis, it is private enterprise that will develop the North, that does the work, and we do yet not have a mechanism to help us work together effectively."

In the presence of the delegates, including U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Aglukkaq proclaimed that at Canada's initiative, the Council will establish a "circumpolar business forum" that will "permit businesses and industry to collaborate with Arctic states and other permanent participants" in developing "the natural resources in the circumpolar region."

It is estimated that the Arctic, which is already the source of a fifth of global fishery production, possesses 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30 percent of undiscovered natural gas reserves. The region also has rich deposits of diamonds, and potential mine sites for gold, silver, copper, lead, and zinc.

The lucrative economic opportunities that are arising from the melting of the polar ice caps are causing states to strengthen their military presence in the region, transforming the Arctic into a theater for potentially explosive confrontations, and not only between the circumpolar countries. The major European powers, Japan, China, and India have all served notice that they aim to become important economic actors in the North. The fact that the Arctic has not yet been fully mapped, with political and economic borders still not clearly established, is accentuating geopolitical tensions.

At its May meeting, the Arctic Council admitted six new permanent observers: China, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. The observer countries, who do not have voting rights on the Council, affirmed that they would not interfere with the respective territorial and

economic-zone claims of the circumpolar nations.

Although Canada and Russia, which together control most of the Arctic, are historical adversaries and have rival claims to exclusive economic zones on the Arctic sea floor, they have traditionally sought to collaborate in upholding the prerogatives of the Arctic states against “outsiders.” “We cannot forget,” said Aglukkaq, “that the Arctic Council was created by the inhabitants of the North, for the inhabitants of the North, well before the region became of interest to the rest of the world.”

Recognizing that its “historic rights” no longer suffice to maintain its control over the Arctic, the Canadian ruling elite has repeatedly pushed to expand its military presence in the North. In an editorial published on May 17, the *Ottawa Citizen* urged the Conservative government not to scale back its plans to build up Canada’s military forces in the Far North due to budgetary constraints. To fulfill Canadian ambitions in the Arctic, stated the *Citizen*, “persuasion is good, but military hardware—battleships, icebreakers, aerial patrols by fighter jets, and satellite surveillance—will garner more respect.”

On coming to office in 2006, the Conservatives made the buildup of Canada’s military presence in the Arctic a major priority. In addition to ordering the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to stage an annual military exercise in the Arctic, Operation Nanook, since 2007, the Canadian government has established a CAF training center at Resolute Bay, one of the northernmost settlements in the country, as well as deep-water mooring and re-supply bases to support the Royal Canadian Navy in Nanisivik.

As a second-rank world power, Canada has historically been forced to pursue its imperialist interests through an alliance with the United States, with whom it has a deep and long-standing economic and geopolitical partnership. Yet important differences over the Arctic have divided and continue to divide Canada and the US. Washington has never recognized Canadian sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, and has a rival claim to Canada’s in the Beaufort Sea, site of rich deposits of oil and natural gas.

Recognizing the growing geostrategic importance of the Arctic, the Obama administration published this past May the US’s first ever “National Strategy for the Arctic Region.” After a few hypocritical phrases about protecting the environment, the strategy document commits the US to striving to “seize the greater part of the economic opportunities in the region.” It also pledges “to

advance the security interests of the United States” by ensuring US ships and planes can operate “under, on, and throughout the airspace and waters of the Arctic.”

Both Canada and the US are concerned that Russia is taking the lead in exploiting the Arctic. Russia, which possesses over 90 percent of known oil reserves in the Arctic, has the largest fleet of icebreakers in the world, and a significant and growing military presence in the region. Moscow recently concluded key agreements with China and Japan concerning security and development in the Arctic.

Under Canadian, Norwegian and US pressure, NATO has taken an increasing interest in the far north. The US-based “Defence One” website published an article this week that argues a major expansion of NATO’s presence in the Arctic must be a crucial component of the US’s “pivot to Asia,” that is, its preparations for war with China. It concludes, “To quote a US Coast Guard rear admiral, ‘ready or not, here comes the Arctic.’ If the alliance buries its head in the snow and ignores its potential value in the Arctic, it risks ceding the window of opportunity to Russia and China.”

The US was taken aback last spring when Iceland’s President, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, announced a new Arctic forum, named the “Arctic Circle,” with China as a founding member, the very same day that Iceland announced it was entering into a free trade pact with China.

The accelerating effects of climate change, which threatens the world’s population with disaster, is viewed by the capitalist elite as a golden opportunity for massive profits. The militarization of the Arctic and the irrational exploitation of the region’s natural resources by private capital will have devastating environmental consequences and only further intensify the antagonisms between rival nation-states.



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