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A New Neighbour in Town

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Solo Flight

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A NEW NEIGHBOUR IN TOWN

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A NEW NEIGHBOUR IN TOWN

Introduction

Canada's North has generated much interest in recent years. The inhospitable region had strategic value during the Cold War but was largely forgotten since. That was until Russia planted a flag on the North Pole's seabed to signify its claim on the region. A public act received with anger from Washington and Ottawa.¹

Global warming has rekindled scientific and national security interests in the region: the Arctic warms up at a rate twice as fast as the rest of the planet, and the melting of the ice, which is expected to be complete by 2035, will allow access to new transport and resource opportunities.² Canada's renewed political attention to the region was mostly not until the Harper government when Canada's sovereignty in the North became a political priority. Harper's slogan for the party's commitment to the Arctic: "*either use it or lose it*".³

Many states now have overlapping claims and interests in the Arctic. While there is currently little practical use for the region, the prospect of future access to resources and control of shipping routes, and the strategic value the region will offer once the ice is

¹ Luhn, Alec. *Freezing cold war: militaries move in as Arctic ice retreats - photo essay*. 16 October 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/16/arctic-ice-retreats-climate-us-russian-canadian-chinese-military> (accessed May 15, 2021).

² Weitz, Rockford. *Competition heats up in the melting Arctic, and the US isn't prepared to counter Russia*. 19 April 2021. <https://theconversation.com/competition-heats-up-in-the-melting-arctic-and-the-us-isnt-prepared-to-counter-russia-149341> (accessed May 16, 2021).

³ Bartenstein, Kristin. *"Use it or Lose it": An appropriate slogan?* 1 July 2010. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/fr/magazines/immigration-jobs-and-canadas-future/use-it-or-lose-it-an-appropriate-and-wise-slogan/> (accessed May 10, 2021).

receded, are enough to stimulate interest. The economic attraction in the region followed the US Geological Service concluding that the “Arctic continental shelves may be the largest unexplored prospective area for petroleum remaining on earth”.⁴ The current Arctic states are Canada, U.S., Greenland (Denmark), Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia. Additionally, China proclaimed itself a “near Arctic nation”, a claim that is mostly contested.⁵ While the geography appears to give Canada rights to parts of the Arctic, the U.S. and Russia are increasingly challenging its sovereignty in the region.⁶

This essay will demonstrate that the only sensible option for Canada to independently assert its sovereignty in the Arctic in the face of Russian and U.S. contestation is through soft power by renewing trades and developing bilateral agreements with Russia, while maintaining its military presence. It will do so by first looking at Canadian, Russian, and U.S. claims and capabilities in the Arctic. It will then consider how Russia is likely to behave in the region by observing its relation with China and patterns of behaviour in other regions. Finally it will look at how trade agreements with Russia may facilitate Arctic collaboration and further Canada’s interests.

⁴ Manicom, James. “Identity Politics and the Russia-Canada Continental Shelf Dispute: An Impediment to Cooperation.” *Geopolitics* (Routledge) 18, no. 1 (September 2012), 60.

⁵ Quinn, Eilis. *Pompeo calls out Canada, China, Russia over Arctic policy*. 6 May 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/pompeo-canada-russia-china-arctic-1.5125293> (accessed May 8, 2021).

⁶ Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolski, Paul Stronski. “Russia in the Arctic.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (U.S. European Command), March 2021.

The Arctic arena players

Canada

Canada has a population that identifies with the North as well as a top down identity as a Northern nation for which the Arctic is of national importance.⁷ Politically, it was not until 2006 that northern security became a priority. The Harper government first introduced the need for independent capacity to defend Canada's Arctic sovereignty shortly before Russia claimed the North Pole through the very mediatized planting of a Russian flag on its seabed. The priority to strengthen the Canadian North became immediately more critical.⁸

Interest for the Arctic has been wavering for a few centuries. The search for a northern passage in the Canadian Arctic started three centuries ago as a means to shorten commercial sea routes. During the Cold War, its importance was linked to its strategic location for deployed military assets. Canada's maritime boundary had been extended to the North Pole based on the Sector Principle since the early 20th century; this original pie of the Arctic was not based on scientific evidence but the assignment on paper of national sectors to Arctic nations. This claim was challenged more than once.⁹ To assert its claim, Canada attempted various projects, including the very controversial High Arctic Relocation of 1953.¹⁰

⁷ Manicom, James. "Identity Politics and the Russia-Canada Continental...", 71.

⁸ Manicom, James. "Identity Politics and the Russia-Canada Continental...", 69.

⁹ Inch, Donald R. "An examination of Canada's Claim to Sovereignty in the Arctic." *Manitoba Law Journal* (CanLII) 31, no. 1 (1965), 34.

¹⁰ Cavell, Janice. "Consolidation and Control of ALL Eskimo Income." *Journal of Canadian Studies* (University of Toronto Press) 55, no. 1 (Winter 2021), 118.

Canada's claim in the Arctic in modern days also includes focus on the North West Passage (NWP) as internal waters, a claim that is being challenged by both the U.S. and the EU.¹¹ Canada's commitment to the North came with government promises to build up defence capacity in the region with Arctic Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPVs), stealth snowmobiles, Coast Guard icebreaker, etc.¹²

In 2013, Canada announced a forthcoming Canadian assertion of sovereignty over the North Pole based on scientific surveys. Canada has since remained reluctant to give international access to the region; Germany, the EU, Japan, South Korea, China, India, having all signified strong interest in the potential shipping route.¹³ To control access, Canada has used the Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act (AWPP) to request that all ships notify Canada when entering the area, including the NWP.¹⁴

While Canada maintains the claim of sovereignty in the Arctic, the Trudeau government has not showed additional commitment to the region. Defence spending continues but based on previously approved projects. The government's message is that northern sovereignty is about the communities who live there, so they are supported, and less about the importance of controlling and asserting our claim. There has been little sense of urgency to act; the Arctic is viewed as still cold and harsh, just slightly warmer.¹⁵

¹¹ Quinn, Eilis. *Pompeo calls out Canada, China...*

¹² Roberts, Kari. "Why Russia will play by the rules in the Arctic." *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* (Routledge) 21, no. 2 (February 2015), 120.

¹³ Roberts, Kari. "Why Russia will play by the rules in the Arctic...", 114.

¹⁴ Manicom, James. "Identity Politics and the Russia-Canada...", 70.

¹⁵ Brockman, Alex. *Northern defence upgrades part of plan to protect Canada's Arctic, Sajjan says*. 20 August 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/defence-minister-arctic-policy-alert-visit-1.4790509> (accessed May 1, 2021).

Canada's capabilities in the Arctic are not comparable to its most significant contestant, Russia, or to most other Arctic nations. While Canada has remained firm on sovereignty in the North, it is not ready to react aggressively to control it. Like many other NATO nations, Canada has seen the North as "high North, low tensions" while Russia has actively been building impressive capabilities.¹⁶ Canada's Northern surveillance and defence capability comes from fixed-wing aircrafts, a few heavy and medium icebreakers, frigates capable of limited Northern operations, and the upcoming fleet of AOPVs, the first which is currently undergoing contractor trials. This Northern capability recapitalization effort comes as Russia, Denmark, and Norway are also all asserting their jurisdiction over parts of the Arctic.¹⁷

The AOPV is equipped with a single 25 mm machine gun designed for protection against small boats. Built on commercial standards, its survivability characteristics and armament limit it to constabulary roles. Its ice-breaking capacity is limited to first year ice. In comparison, the Royal Danish Navy patrols the Arctic waters using ships equipped with 76 mm gun, Browning machine guns, Evolved Sea Sparrow Missiles, and torpedoes. Norway's coastal defence uses 6 ultra-fast Skjold Stealth Missile Corvettes, with one 76 mm canon, 8 Kongsberg Surface to Surface missiles, Mistral Surface to Air Missile, and more protection than Canada's AOPV.¹⁸

¹⁶ Brockman, Alex. *How Russian advances in the Arctic are leaving NATO behind*. CBC. 9 January 2017. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/russia-arctic-military-build-up-1.3926162> (accessed May 1, 2021).

¹⁷ The Associated Press. *Russia will pour resources into Arctic, Putin says*. 15 June 2017. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/russia-resources-military-arctic-putin-1.4161778> (accessed May 1, 2021).

¹⁸ Smol, Robert. "Arctic ships all sight, no fight." *Sun Times*, October 2018.

Canada's submarine fleet also has very limited capability in the Arctic. Their lack of under-ice capacity was highlighted during ICEX 2018, a UK, Canada, U.S. Arctic exercise where they shone by their absence.¹⁹ Submarines are most likely to remain the strongest asset in a combat-effective Navy in the future, and other nations are able to operate under Canadian ice.²⁰

Russia

Russia's claim in the Arctic is based on economy and security interests. For Russia, the military activity in the Arctic is necessary to assure reliable control over the region and to protect Russia's interests. The Arctic military strengthening is therefore part of its economic strategy.²¹ Russia deposited a claim in 2015 greatly increasing its declared ownership on the Arctic, and another in 2021 that covered 70% of the Arctic seabed, up to Canada's EEZ. This latest claim is supposedly based on extensive research activity to map the extension of Russia's continental shelf.²² Russia's claim is supported by China, which also benefits from Russia's reciprocal support of its claim as a 'near-Arctic' nation.²³ Russia's Arctic claim is heavily motivated by the potential for mineral

¹⁹ Jefferd-Moore, kaila. *Canadian submarines not part of International Arctic under-ice exercise*. 11 June 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/canadian-submarines-not-part-of-international-arctic-under-ice-exercise-1.4699208> (accessed May 12, 2021).

²⁰ Royal Canadian Navy - DND. *Canada in a New Maritime World LEADMARK 2050*. Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 2016, 50.

²¹ Bratersky, Alexander. *Russia's Arctic activity to increase with fresh strategy and more capability tests*. 11 April 2021. <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/frozen-pathways/2021/04/11/russias-arctic-activity-to-increase-with-fresh-strategy-and-more-capability-tests/> (accessed May 16, 2021).

²² Breum, Martin. *Russia extends its claim to the Arctic Ocean seabed*. 4 April 2021. <https://www.arctictoday.com/russia-extends-its-claim-to-the-arctic-ocean-seabed/> (accessed May 7, 2021).

²³ Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolski, Paul Stronski. "Russia in the Arctic."..., 2.

and hydrocarbons under the seabed, and is backed by a substantial information campaign.²⁴ Russia's motivation is also to develop and control the Northern Sea Route.²⁵

Russia's capabilities in the Arctic are commensurate with its claim. Not only has Russia built its fleet and military infrastructure in the Arctic, they have greatly increased their presence in the region. The oil discovery in Siberia has offered Russia the capital to fuel the post-Soviet Russia military expansion and to re-establish the country's statute as "energy superpower".²⁶ Russia has built its icebreaker capacity and its under-ice capability with its SSNs that have been patrolling under ice at levels not seen since the Cold War. Capability recently showcased by the simultaneous surfacing of 3 nuclear submarines through ice, projecting significant force in the Arctic. The next steps to its Arctic show of force demonstration will be to tests of Su-34, Su-35, and B200 amphibious airplanes.²⁷

The revitalizing of military activity in the Arctic has been a priority for Russia, they have the largest fleet on the northern coast, have built modern military bases with significant capability, and have increased Arctic activity in support of their claim.²⁸

²⁴ Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolski, Paul Stronski. "Russia in the Arctic."..., 10.

²⁵ Klimenko, Camilila T.N. Sorensen and Ekaterina. "Emerging Chinese-Russian cooperation in the Arctic." *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Policy Paper 46*. pdf. Solna, June 2017, 3.

²⁶ Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolski, Paul Stronski. "Russia in the Arctic." ..., 4.

²⁷ Bratersky, Alexander. *Russia's Arctic activity to increase with fresh strategy and more capability tests*. 11 April 2021. <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/frozen-pathways/2021/04/11/russias-arctic-activity-to-increase-with-fresh-strategy-and-more-capability-tests/> (accessed May 16, 2021).

²⁸ Brockman, Alex. *How Russian advances in the Arctic are leaving NATO ...*

U.S. and NATO

While NATO countries like Denmark have overlapping claims with Canada, they don't pose a significant risk, as lines of communication and collaboration already exist within allies. The U.S. however, while our closest ally, are contesting Canada's claim on the NWP and assert it should be an international strait.

The U.S., while not making additional claims in the Arctic, show strong interest and have warned that China's claim is illegitimate.²⁹ The significance of the U.S. in the Arctic relates to their role in continental security and their opposition to Canada's claim of the NWP.

Russia's next move?

As Canada and Russia have both made claims in the Arctic, and now that Canada is taking delivery of its first AOPV, there is momentum on both sides. Up to now, Russia had enjoyed a fairly undisturbed advance in its Arctic operation, and other than disputing its claim, it had not been opposed. Now that Canada will increase its presence, will it influence the Kremlin?

Russia was severely reduced following the end of the Cold War. Under Putin, and with the help of capital from oil and gas, it has returned to a more significant status. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Western sanctions have forced Russia to look towards Asia for technology and capitals. It turned to China for immediate bilateral agreements with the giant. Russia has lots of raw material and little capital and workforce,

²⁹ Quinn, Eilis. *Pompeo calls out Canada, China...*

China has a great need for raw material and oil and gas, and an abundance of capital and workforce; the collaboration was natural.³⁰ While the Sino-Russian collaboration appears like an alliance, which could lead to a common front against the West, it is mainly a mutually beneficial relationship and, for the most part, limited to economical collaboration. The exception being the Arctic where Russia is using Chinese capital to develop its capability, and China is using Russia to grant access and influence in the Arctic.³¹

The Sino-Russian relation and collaboration outside the U.N. headquarters appear worrisome as both nations are behaving aggressively in other regions of the globe: Russia building up military power on Ukraine's border, and China sending record number of bombers in Taiwan's air defence zone.³² Russia also appears unafraid to use military solutions to political problems, which has led to mistrust.³³ It is however unlikely that China would support Russian aggression against the West as it is not willing to sacrifice relationships with western economies, and in particular the U.S.³⁴

On the other hand, Russia is trying to reassert its place as a significant power on the international scene. It does so through its participation to international forums, such as

³⁰ Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen, Vincent Gallucci. "The return of China, post-Cold War Russia, and the Arctic: Changes on land and at sea." *Marine Policy* (Elsevier) 72 (April 2016), 240.

³¹ Buchanan, Elizabeth. *Russia and China in the Arctic: assumptions and realities*. Australian Strategy Policy Institute. 25 September 2020. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/russia-and-china-in-the-arctic-assumptions-and-realities/> (accessed May 9, 2021).

³² Mackinnon, Jack Detsch and Amy. *China and Russia Turn Deeper Ties into a Military Challenge for Biden*. 20 April 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/20/china-russia-military-attention-us-policy-xi-putin-biden-taiwan-ukraine/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

³³ Roberts, Kari. "Why Russia will play by the rules in the Arctic."..., 113.

³⁴ Klimentenko, Camilila T.N. Sorensen and Ekaterina. "Emerging Chinese-Russian cooperation in the Arctic." ..., 2.

the UN Security Council, the G8, and the Arctic Council, of which it takes chairmanship this year. Russia is unlikely to risk those seats over the Arctic as it benefits from them. Furthermore, Russia strongly supports the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.³⁵

Russia values international organizations that give it its power, it also knows that the relationship with China is a marriage of convenience, and will not be indefinite, as China's appetite for weapons will wane.³⁶ The most likely course of action for Russia is that it will continue to play by international rules, while pushing the boundaries through small aggressive provocations.³⁷

Russia: foe or partner?

Canada's hard power capacity and willingness to use it is no match to other players in the Arctic. Its sovereignty is being challenged by Russia, but also by allies such as Denmark and the U.S. There is however optimism as Arctic states have a history of collaboration, and rules exist to resolve conflicts.³⁸ Canada should capitalize on soft power to assert its sovereignty in the Arctic.

To oppose Russia's claim with hard power, Canada will require support from the U.S., which will likely signify conceding the NWP claim, which is not in Canada's interest. Also, while not historically close, Canada and Russia have much in common: both are Northern states, both are modest economies that neighbour giants. Russia has

³⁵ Roberts, Kari. "Why Russia will play by the rules in the Arctic."..., 116.

³⁶ Mackinnon, Jack Detsch and Amy. *China and Russia Turn Deeper Ties into a Military Challenge for Biden*. 20 April 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/20/china-russia-military-attention-us-policy-xi-putin-biden-taiwan-ukraine/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

³⁷ Roberts, Kari. "Why Russia will play by the rules in the Arctic."..., 114.

³⁸ Manicom, James. "Identity Politics and the Russia-Canada...", 61.

already expressed, through its Arctic Concept, willingness to collaborate with Canada.³⁹ Canada, being a relatively small global player, cannot limit its world relations to like-minded countries; as we have done with Saudi Arabia and China, entering in bilateral relations with Russia will serve Canadian interests.

Canada's foreign policies need to project its interests, not only values, and take advantage of the increasing proximity with our Northern neighbour. As the power shifts East, away from the U.S., Canada will need to establish foreign relations that are less dependant on the U.S.⁴⁰ Bilateral agreements with Russia could lead to the recognition, by Russia, of Canada's claim and lead to collaborations to alleviate the need for increase surveillance of the North; as Russia would be less inclined to challenge Canada's sovereignty. This position could ease the U.S. challenge of the NWP as there would be a front supporting Canada's claim against the U.S.⁴¹ It could even lead to Canada being a 'mending wall' between Russia and NATO.⁴²

³⁹ Roberts, Kari. "Why Russia will play by the rules in the Arctic."..., 120.

⁴⁰ Paikin, Zachary. *Revisiting Canada-Russia Relations: A New Paradigm for a Multipolar World*. 5 April 2021. <https://peacediplomacy.org/2021/04/05/revisiting-canada-russia-relations-a-new-paradigm-for-a-multipolar-world/> (accessed May 15, 2021).

⁴¹ Roberts, Kari. "Why Russia will play by the rules in the Arctic."..., 124.

⁴² Westdal, Chris. *A Way Ahead With Russia - Policy Paper*. CGAI. April 2016. https://www.cgai.ca/a_way_ahead_with_russia (accessed May 15, 2021).

Conclusion

As highlighted above, Canada is ill equipped to face Russia's hard power challenges in the Arctic, and the delivery of the AOPVs will not improve Canada's capabilities significantly. Western states have generally considered the Arctic low priority since the end of the Cold War, while Russia has actively strengthened its Northern force, and increased Arctic military and commercial activity in support of its sovereignty claims. While China's support to Russian military actions against the West is unlikely, a military response to Russia's provocations would result in a negative outcome for all sides.

Canada has an opportunity to capitalize soft power by seeking trades with Russia. The West sanctions drove Russia to focus on Chinese partnership; reopening lines of communications with Russia could draw them back to the collaboration table. While this would be both bold and very sensitive diplomatically, it is the one that independently advances Canadian interests.

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