



Three Polar bears approach the starboard bow of the Los Angeles-class fast attack submarine USS Honolulu (SSN 718) while surfaced 280 miles from the North Pole. Photo: U.S. Navy

# Arctic Sovereignty: Fear and Loathing Over Santa's Workshop

Jeremy Kinsman

*In the past 30 years, the geopolitical world's relationship to the Arctic has changed. Climate change has produced geographical change, which has significantly influenced political and military debates over who controls what. Canada's claims to Arctic sovereignty, including its claim to the North Pole, comprise a crucial component of our bilateral relationships with both the United States and Russia. On the US file, the keyword is cooperation. With the Russians, it's a little more complicated these days.*

**T**he North Pole is one of the remote places on Earth that compel the human capacity for wonder. Sir Edmund Hillary completed the ultimate trifecta; after being the first to climb Mount Everest (with Sherpa Tenzing Norgay), he reached the South Pole by land. In 1985, he made it to the North Pole, where he shared a bottle of champagne with astronaut Neil Armstrong, just as the Arctic began to open up under a rapidly changing climate.

In 1986, there was the first access by dogsled; in 1987, the first surfacing by a submarine, the USS Charlotte through 61 inches of ice; in 1988, a 13-man team of skiers made it—nine Soviet citizens and four Canadians.

Soon, loosening ice conditions made North Pole visitations almost routine: By 2007, the Pole had been reached 66 times by surface ships—including 54 icebreaker visits from Russia, and one by Canada's only heavy icebreaker, the Louis St.-Laurent, back in 1994. All-terrain vehicles also crossed from Russian to Canadian coasts on increasingly floating ice on which the Russians had been setting up seasonal operational camps.

Russia's Vladimir Putin and Canada's Stephen Harper espouse respective nationalist narratives about the North that dwell on threats. The two countries, according to Icelandic Arctic expert Nikolaj Petersen, have become the Arctic region's "most militaristic" in tone. Who knew the Arctic Ocean's melting would prompt a Russia-Canada territorial competition for the North Pole that is itself more rhetorical than real, riddled with inflated nationalist identity-fiction on both sides?

Russia's military buildup in their North is notable. Degraded after the break-up of the USSR, the Northern Fleet is again stocked with nuclear and conventional icebreakers, submarines, and a nuclear missile cruiser as flagship, though most of these ships have operational limitations, including in heavy ice. Is this normal Russian recovery, or does it portend something dark about their Arctic intentions as suggested by Canadian Arctic expert Rob Huebert? How does Canada connect to its adjacent Arctic neighbour at a time when the Canadian prime minister is shunning any "normal" business with Russia because of what US Secretary of State Kerry has called its "land grab" in Ukraine?

**A**s Canada's ambassador to the fledgling beaten-up democracy that was Russia in the 1990s, representing Brian Mulroney and then Jean Chrétien, both buddies of Boris Yeltsin, I scarcely

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imagined that 20 years later a Canadian prime minister would come across as the world's leading adversary of Yeltsin's successor. The lofty language of cooperation invoked by Mikhail Gorbachev's call in 1987 for an Arctic Zone of Peace, and by Brian Mulroney's 1989 Leningrad speech urging Arctic nations to work together on Arctic governance, has been replaced by comparisons of Putin to Hitler, though not by Harper, yet he digs into the old Cold War freezer left in the national basement for rhetoric about "the poison of communism."

The commonplace notion that the biggest threat to the Arctic region is spillover from conflict elsewhere is becoming real. Until the Ukraine crisis, Harper had insulated the Arctic from geopolitics elsewhere. But now the deteriorating relationship is closing off an avenue of bilateral cooperation both countries and the region itself vitally need.

First, a review of Arctic facts:

- Antarctica is a non-national continent surrounded by water. The North Pole is its opposite, lying under a frozen ocean surrounded by five coastal nations. Russian coast forms half the latitudinal Arctic Circle, Canada's a quarter, and Norway, the US via Alaska, and Denmark via Greenland, the rest. Unlike international governance specified for Antarctica by treaty, Arctic governance is a composite of national sovereignty and the multilateral Arctic Council in which the five coastal states join three Arctic states—Finland, Iceland, and Sweden—without coastal access to the Arctic Ocean, and representatives of six indigenous peoples. The Arctic Council attempts to chart some common policies and approaches on science, environmental protection, shipping, and mutual commitments to respect

international norms and the rule of law regarding competing territorial claims.

Here are some facts crucial to understanding governance issues:

- Russia is the dominant Arctic presence. Of four million Arctic inhabitants, two million are Russian citizens; 650,000 are Alaskans, and 115,000 are Canadians (half indigenous). Presidential stand-in Dmitry Medvedev depicted the region as the resource base for Russia for this century. It already accounts for 20 per cent of the Russian GDP, and 22 per cent of exports, largely northern Siberian oil and gas.

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- The Arctic Ocean's ice cover and passages through the archipelago are melting at a rate three or four times faster than global warming elsewhere. It opens the region to shipping short cuts between Europe and Asia, over the already navigable Russian Northern Sea Route, or through the still problematic but rapidly changing Northwest Passage that Canada claims as internal waters. It also promises the hypothetical if complicated extraction of seabed resources the US Geological Survey estimates contain up to 25 per cent of the world's oil and gas.
- There are no significant disputes over respective sovereignties on land. Disputes relate to: a) Claims and techniques for deter-

mining territorial waters, such as Canada's assertion of sovereignty over the Northwest Passage or Canada's dispute with the US over national jurisdiction in the Beaufort Sea, and to some extent to Russia's claim the Northern Sea Route is entirely internal waters; and, b) Seabed claims under provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Critical to the controversy concerning the North Pole is the UNCLOS entitlement beyond the Exclusive Economic Zone of 200 miles to a further 150 nautical miles of national monopoly on seabed resource development if it can be proven the area is a natural extension of the continental shelf.

Vladimir Putin's subtraction of democratic space in Russia is a story told elsewhere. But arguably pertinent to the Arctic is his campaign to create a new patriotic narrative for Russian identity to fill the void left after the abandonment of the all-embracing communist system. Drawing from pre-revolutionary imperial pride, and historic Orthodox culture, his patriotic narrative was invoked to justify the unilateral annexation of Crimea.

Western reaction has been to sanction Russia for its illegal action, not enough for some but too much for others. The question here is whether to trust Putin's assertions, as reported by the *Globe and Mail* on May 25, that he intends, "to respect international law in the (Arctic) region and to negotiate with all interested nations."

The planting by submersible of a Russian flag on the seabed beneath the North Pole in 2007 was brushed off as just a stunt to commemorate a notable feat, roughly like the US flag placed on the moon. "I don't see anything scary in it," Putin said.

But Putin's actions on Ukraine have been "scary" for many. Stephen Harper terms Putin's "expansionism" a "long-term menace...with serious long-term consequences." It is hard to see how Arctic issues could be exempted from this warning.

Putin's reassurances will need to be supported by positive actions to restore requisite minimal trust in his intentions. On Arctic issues, Putin recently described the Russia-Norway agreement, after 10 years of negotiation on offshore rights around the Svalbard archipelago, as being "the best path to resolve all questions with regard to the Arctic."

It was the path identified by the "Arctic Five" at an exceptional meeting at Ilulisset, Greenland in 2008, especially on the issue of extended seabed claims extended outward toward the North Pole.

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Subsequent to agreement in 2010 between Foreign Ministers Sergey Lavrov and Lawrence Cannon that respective Arctic seabed claims would be solved through the UNCLOS process based on scientific evidence, Canadian legal negotiators concluded with Russian counterparts that their national claims were essentially not overlapping. But after Prime Minister Harper ordered the Canadian claim to be re-done, the preliminary submission in January 2014 signaled the belief the North Pole is Canadian, even though no scientific evidence has emerged to back up such an ambition. It will be years before the issue is resolved, at which point Canadian politics will be in a different place.

Ranking Arctic authority Franklyn Griffiths credits Harper's belief in Canada's northern vocation as sincere and he welcomes the elevation of profile the prime minister has given the Arctic. But Professor Griffiths speaks for many in deploring Harper's rhetoric as excessively dramatic, postulating threats that create a form of "possession anxiety," warning Ca-

nadians we have to "use it or lose it" in a kind of "sovereignty fetishism."

As for concrete action, steel has still not been cut on three heavy icebreakers promised seven years ago. Mapping goes on but Canadian infrastructure is very modest. The North is expensive, especially in an age of austerity. Multilateral cooperation on the issues and bilateral programs on science and shared infrastructure could enhance economies of scale to develop our North.

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Canadian professionals with experience working with the Russians on Arctic issues believe that Russian transgressions of international law on Crimea should not be transposed as relevant to the very different international northern context. They believe we need to learn together as partners. Former Canadian ambassador to Moscow John Sloan cites melting permafrost as an urgent shared issue ripe for cooperation, as it affects northern communities, transport, and resource extraction.

Michael Byers points out that in substance, the Arctic has "been more cooperative on the whole than anywhere else on Earth" and scientists argue that cooperation should not be interrupted, especially as there are no regional developments or serious challenges to Canadian sovereignty to change the assessment of former chief of defence staff Walter Natynczyk who in 2009 reported no conventional military threat to the Arctic.

Our biggest sovereignty challenge used to be from the US, over whether the Northwest Passage was internal Canadian waters or an international strait. Pierre Trudeau asserted Canadian control after the provocative pas-

sage of the Manhattan in 1970. After the US icebreaker Polar Sea transited from Greenland to Alaska in 1985, the Mulroney government pressed Canada's assertion of legal authority more strenuously by enclosing the waters under "straight baselines." On President Reagan's visit to Ottawa in 1987, Prime Minister Mulroney showed him an antique globe he had received from Paul Desmarais that depicted the Passage as Canadian. "Brian, this wasn't the map they showed me on Air Force One coming up here," the president said. Gen. Colin Powell, who was then Reagan's national security adviser took thereafter to referring to "Mulroney's Rube Goldberg map." But the warm personal relationship encouraged a "pragmatic solution;" the Arctic Cooperation Agreement of 1988 whereby the two countries "agree to disagree" on the territorial issue but registered US commitment to seek Canada's consent for surface transits through the passage.

It's unlikely a relationship of personal confidence is available between the leaders of Russia and Canada, who portray themselves as opposites but whose adversarial, top-down, and secretive instincts and styles have a lot in common. Their shared default position is chronic distrust and misrepresentation of the professed motivations of others, including fellow citizens. For Putin, human rights de-

fenders and protesters in Moscow are pawns of Russia's "enemies," as were protesters in Kiev. Harper invents non-existent Canadian "academics and bureaucratic circles" who allegedly favour giving up Canadian Arctic sovereignty to some kind of Antarctic internationalism.

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The political reality is that Harper's profession that Russia represents a real threat to "world peace" and needs to be shunned by G7 countries makes Canada-Russia partnership and cooperation untenable for now. Given that Canada chairs the Arctic Council until 2015, it will handicap multilateral work as well.

The Arctic Council needs a stronger mandate for cooperative action without encroaching on the need for consensus among the eight sovereign members. US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg said in 2010

that the Arctic is a test-case of the international community's ability to deal with the great trans-national issues of the 21st century. But progress requires belief in multilateralism and resolution to tackle climate change, where Canada sadly lags in official belief or effort.

The Arctic region badly needs fresh policy leadership on the bilateral level. Mary Simon urges Canada and the US to be "first movers" on Arctic climate change strategy. More convergence with the US might even, in P. Whitney Lackenbauer's concept, lead to a "grand compromise" comprising a bilateral deal on the Beaufort Sea and on continental energy supply and climate change.

As to Russia, we need to hope events will permit us to move from collisions of the Cold War to tackling together the imperatives of the Arctic's future, including consultation on the North Pole. As John Sloan puts it, "If we don't have a Russian policy on Arctic issues, we don't have an Arctic policy." It's past time we did. **P**

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