ASSERTING CANADIAN ARCTIC SOVEREIGNTY: IS THE BEST OFFENCE A GOOD DEFENCE?

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Abstract

The Canadian Arctic has always occupied a space within our identity as a nation. Recently, however, propelled by a changing climate, the growing demand for natural resources, and the actions of international actors, the Arctic has been expanding as a political priority as well. Canada’s Northern Strategy, introduced in 2009, outlines four areas of priority: exercising Canadian Arctic sovereignty, protecting the environment, ensuring economic development, and the well-being of Northern communities. The stimulus for the Northern Strategy was the announcement of the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS), a $3.6 billion initiative that at once asserts Canadian Arctic sovereignty as a priority for the present government, and displays the Defence-heavy approach that will realize this goal. In light of the governance trends such as an emphasis on Defence incentives for the advancement of Canadian Arctic sovereignty? Through the analysis of Cold War-era Defence memorandums, a juxtaposition of the past and present political environment of the area is presented. The economic propositions of the $3.1 billion plan to build Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ships is explored through consideration of the October 2014 budget analysis released by the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Finally, the social implications of the current government’s Defence-heavy approach are framed by the syntax of human security that they imply. The current NSPS initiative is found to be incompatible with the existing political environment of the Arctic circumpolar region, not only for economic reasons, but because of social influences that threaten Canada’s Arctic sovereignty itself.

The National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS) at a Glance

- The $3.6 billion National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS) includes the following projects:
  - **Combat Vessel Work Package ($2.3 billion):** $3.1 billion allocated towards the construction of 6-8 Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS).
  - $300 million allocated towards the construction of up to 15 Canadian Surface Combatants (CSC).
  - Irving Shipyard Inc. has been selected to construct the AOPS and CSC vessels.

- **Non-Combat Vessel Work Package ($7.3 billion):**
  - $2.4 billion for 3 Offshore Fisheries Science Vessels.
  - $1.44 billion for an Offshore Oceanographic Science vessel.
  - $325 million for 2 Joint Support Ships (JSS) for the Royal Canadian Navy.
  - $1.3 billion for up to 5 Offshore Patrol Vessels for the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG).
  - $1.4 billion for up to 5 Medium Endurance Multi-Task Vessels (CCG).

- **Vancouver Shipyard has been selected to construct the Non-Combat Vessel Work Package.**

The Changing Political Climate of the Arctic

The atmosphere that existed within the Arctic circumpolar region during the Cold War was marked by the concept of security adopted by the Atlantic nations; a balance of power whereby neither nation would take the opening shot from attacking” (Lesteven 2011). As such, international cooperation between states that did exist was precipitated by shared security interests, and thus limited. This is in direct contrast to the Canadian Arctic.

Cold War Era Arctic International Relations

- International cooperation centered on Defence initiatives (of both states).
- Highly competitive and militarized environment.
- Little cooperation between the two states on any environmental matters concerning the Arctic.
- Little to no natural resource development/ economic activity.
- State monopoly on human security, used to transfer threats to international military-aid.

Post-Cold-War Arctic International Relations

- Established international forum to accommodate cooperation has been constructed.
- Increased cooperation between nations on environmental matters in the Arctic is being undertaken.
- Environmental Security has been an emphasis.
- Arctic sovereigns have created an organization to more adequately manage the Arctic.

Excerpts from Defence memorandums during the Cold War:

- "It is generally felt that owners of Canadian and American territory, air space, and waters (including subsoil) would be de facto maintaining armed forces to guard the area; it is thus not clear that this area is not subject to the principles of international law governing the conduct of armed forces in peacetime.” (GoR, R.M. Williams, 1969 (Lackenhauer, 2010)).
- "Large scale military activity in the Canadian North would not be justified on the basis of the direct military threat. The threat is not clear.” (GoR, R.M. Williams, 1969 (Lackenhauer, 2010)).
- "There are both definable and indeterminate threats of a non-military nature to Canadian interests in the North,” (GoR, R.M. Williams, 1973 (Lackenhauer, 2010)).
- “In summary, surveillance and reconnaissance targets in the North...are not hostile (and can be approached)... the operations suggest a flexible intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance system.” (GoR, R.M. Williams, 1973 (Lackenhauer, 2010)).

Present-day Arctic Threat Assessment:

- "The most significant security threats today... involve non-state actors such as drug smugglers, criminals, environmental transgressors, and even terrorists, who might take advantage of ice-free Arctic waterways.” (Wright, 2013).

The $3.1 billion AOPS project within the NSPS was the subject of an October 2014 budget analysis prepared by the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO). The conclusions of the PBO were less than optimistic:

- "PBO analysis suggests that the current budget will be insufficient to procure [6-8] AOPS as planned (PBO, 2014).
- "If there are no delays, the current budget will allow for... four ships to be delivered... at the minimum acceptable confidence level of 50%.” (PBO, 2014).

Conclusion

Despite introducing a Canadian Northern Strategy that promised a balanced approach to Canadian Arctic policy, the emphasis placed on the assertion of Canadian Arctic sovereignty through Defence initiatives is in keeping with Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s mantra. The other two are not as well. Due to the environment of cooperation that has emerged in the Arctic, the uncertainty of the economics that underlies the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy and recognition to the periphery of those states initiatives that might be beneficial to both Canada’s Arctic sovereignty and the current focus of the Harper government is ultimately misplaced.

Works Cited

- The Canadian Government has recently redefined the concept of Arctic sovereignty, reiterating a "safety net" for the North, however, the current focus of the Harper government is ultimately misplaced.