

Mixed messages from an 'Arctic superpower'?

Sovereignty, security, and Canada's northern strategy

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"Canada's Arctic is central to our national identity as a northern nation. It is part of our history. And it represents the tremendous potential of our future."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, 2007.¹

Canada boasts the world's longest coastline, and most of it is in the Arctic. It has extensive jurisdiction and sovereign rights in the region, which it sees as a resource frontier, a homeland for its northern peoples, and a source of national identity. Uncertainty over climate change, international interest in Arctic resources, undefined continental shelf boundaries, potentially viable maritime transportation routes (particularly the Northwest Passage which Canada considers its internal waters, not an international strait), and perceived sovereignty and security threats make Canadians keen observers of geopolitical dynamics related to the Arctic and what these mean for their foreign, defence, and domestic policies.

Canada's Arctic identity

At the highest political levels, the Canadian government has intertwined sovereignty issues with strong rhetoric asserting Canada's status as an "Arctic superpower."² On the one hand, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper (in power since 2006) adopts provocative rhetoric, proclaiming that it will "stand up for Canada" based on the idea that "use it or lose it is the first principle of sovereignty."³ It has adopted a sovereignty-security framework as a pretext to generate domestic support for investments in Canadian Forces capabilities and to defend its jurisdiction.

Fortunately, for all the attention that hard-line rhetoric generates in the media and in academic debates, this discourse is only one part of a more complex picture. A more positive and constructive message emerges from Canada's official *Northern Strategy* and other Arctic foreign policy documents released in the last two years. These documents emphasize confidence in Canada's sovereignty position and the need to improve the social and economic well-being of northern residents; promise to advance measures for environmental protection and sustainable development; and commit to enhance internal governance and mechanisms of multilateral cooperation. It is this dual messaging – emphasizing sovereignty, national security, and national interests, as well as international cooperation and stewardship – that reveals Canada's complex perspective and position on Arctic issues.

Although the vast majority of Canadians live close to the 49th parallel with the United States, the Arctic occupies a distinctive place in Canada's national identity. Rich symbolism, imagery and mythology in Canada casts the Arctic as a resource-rich "frontier of destiny," a homeland for indigenous peoples, a fragile environment in need of protection, and a source of national inspiration. Accordingly, Canada's historic and on-going dilemma is how to balance sovereignty, security and stewardship in a manner that protects and projects national interests and values, promotes sustainable development and healthy communities, and facilitates circumpolar stability and cooperation.

Canada inherited its High Arctic from Great Britain in 1880 but governed its northern territories in a "fit of absence of mind" until after the Second World War. The primary impetus for major development was the Cold War, which placed the Arctic at the centre of superpower geopolitics and the American circumpolar security agenda in conflict with Canada's sovereignty. The US largely dictated the pace of military modernization in Canada's North and the accompanying socio-economic, cultural, and environmental impacts. Brief bursts of intensive national interest in the Arctic followed perceived sovereignty challenges in 1969 and 1985, leading Canadian governments to clarify the country's sovereignty position and to promise investments in northern defences, but political attention faded when the threats did. Civilian projects in the Arctic were similarly episodic and incomplete. As a result, the Canadian Arctic



remains an unfulfilled political and economic opportunity despite major domestic achievements like the creation of the Inuit-majority territory of Nunavut in 1999.

From continental security to circumpolar cooperation

With the end of the Cold War, the official discourse in Canada on Arctic affairs shifted away from continental security and narrow sovereignty interests to emphasize circumpolar cooperation and broad definitions of security that prioritized human and environmental dimensions. Canada was an early champion of the Arctic Council and promoted the inclusion of Aboriginal Permanent Participants with a seat at the table. In 1997, a parliamentary committee recommended that Canada's relations focus on international Arctic cooperation through multilateral governance to address pressing "human security" and environmental challenges in the region. "Nothing illustrates more dramatically the link between domestic and foreign factors than the state of the Arctic environment," committee chairman Bill Graham stated in the committee's report. Environmentally sustainable human development was

"the long-term foundation for assuring circumpolar security, with priority being given to the well-being of Arctic peoples and to safeguarding northern habitants from intrusions which have impinged aggressively on them."⁴

This message was encapsulated in *The Northern Dimension of Canada's Foreign Policy*, a policy statement released by Jean Chrétien's Liberal government in June 2000, which promoted four main pillars: to enhance the security and prosperity of Canadians (especially Northerners and Aboriginal peoples); to assert and ensure the preservation of Canada's Arctic sovereignty; to establish the circumpolar region as a vibrant geopolitical entity integrated into a rules-based international system; and to promote the human security of Northerners and the sustainable development of the Arctic.⁵

Early in the new millennium, new climate change reports, vigorous academic and media debates, and hyperbolic rhetoric over boundary disputes like Hans Island and the status of the Northwest Passage raised acute concerns about Canadian sovereignty. The *International Policy Statement* released by Paul Martin's Liberal government in 2005 identified the Arctic as a priority area given "increased security threats, a changed distribution of global power, challenges to existing international institutions, and transformation of the global economy." The next two decades were anticipated to bring major challenges requiring investments in new military capabilities and creative diplomacy. "In addition to growing economic activity in the Arctic region, the effects of climate change are expected to open up our Arctic waters to commercial traffic by as early as 2015," the policy statement noted. "These developments reinforce the need for Canada to monitor and control events

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in its sovereign territory, through new funding and new tools.”⁶ Although the Liberal government fell before it could implement its vision, it had intertwined sovereignty and security in political rhetoric and strategic documents.

The Canadian North was a key component of the Conservatives’ 2005 election platform, which played on the idea of an Arctic sovereignty “crisis” demanding decisive action. Stephen Harper promised that Canada would acquire the military capabilities necessary to defend its sovereignty against external threats:

“The single most important duty of the federal government is to defend and protect our national sovereignty.... It’s time to act to defend Canadian sovereignty. A Conservative government will make the military investments needed to secure our borders. You don’t defend national sovereignty with flags, cheap election rhetoric, and advertising campaigns. You need forces on the ground, ships in the sea, and proper surveillance. And that will be the Conservative approach.”⁷

The Canadian government is trying to project an image of northern resolve

His political message emphasized the need for Canadian action with a particular attention to conventional military forces, differentiating his government from the Liberals whom he believed had swung the pendulum too far towards diplomacy and human development. Harper was going to swing it back towards national defence and resource development, and defend Canada’s sovereign rights in the region.

Since becoming prime minister in 2006, Harper has made the Canadian Forces the centrepiece of his government’s “use it or lose it” approach to the Arctic. This fits within the *Canada First Defence Strategy* vision that pledges to defend Canada’s “vast territory and three ocean areas” through increased defence spending and larger forces.⁸ Naval patrols, over-flights, effective surveillance capabilities, and boots on the ground are identified as tools that Canada will use to defend its Arctic rights. A spate of commitments to invest in military capabilities – from Arctic patrol vessels to new military units – reinforces the government’s emphasis on “hard security” rather than “human security” like its predecessors. Prime Minister Harper explained on 23 February 2007:

“We believe that Canadians are excited about the government asserting Canada’s control and sovereignty in the Arctic. We believe that’s one of the big reasons why Canadians are excited and support our plan to rebuild the Canadian Forces. I think it’s practically

and symbolically hugely important, much more important than the dollars spent. And I’m hoping that years from now, Canada’s Arctic sovereignty, military and otherwise, will be, frankly, a major legacy of this government.”⁹

The logic holds that Canadians are interested in Arctic sovereignty, which makes it a useful issue to generate voter support for defence. This formulation offers little political incentive to downplay the probability of military conflict in the Arctic. The Canadian government is trying to project an image of Northern resolve – primarily to convince its domestic constituencies that it is protecting vital national interests.

Since the Ilulissat declaration of May 2008, however, official statements by the Minister of Foreign Affairs have adopted a more optimistic and less bellicose tone. In his Whitehorse speech on 11 March 2009, Lawrence Cannon acknowledged that geological research and international law – not military clout – would resolve boundary disputes. His statement emphasized collaboration and cooperation. “The depth and complexity of the challenges facing the Arctic are significant, and we recognize the importance of addressing many of these issues by working with our neighbours – through the Arctic Council, other multilateral institutions and our bilateral partnerships,” Cannon expressed. “Strong Canadian leadership in the Arctic will continue to facilitate good international governance in the region.”¹⁰

Canada’s northern strategy

These constructive messages are echoed in *Canada’s Northern Strategy: Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future*, released in July 2009. It emphasizes four main pillars: exercising Canada’s Arctic sovereignty, promoting social and economic development, protecting Canada’s environmental heritage, and improving and devolving Northern governance. The document reinforces a message of partnership: between the federal government and Northern Canadians, and between Canada and its circumpolar neighbours. Critics suggested that the strategy simply reiterated previous government commitments, while supporters suggested that the official document outlined a more coherent framework that shifted emphasis away from narrow security concerns and sovereignty loss. Although the strategy trumpets the government’s commitment to “putting more boots on the Arctic tundra, more ships in the icy water and a better eye-in-the-sky,” it also emphasizes that Canada’s disagreements with its neighbours are “well-managed and pose no sovereignty or defence challenges for Canada.” This signalled a rather abrupt change of tone from previous political messaging.

The “use it or lose it” message that had been frequently mobilized to justify the government’s agenda was absent from *Canada’s Northern Strategy*. Instead, the government stressed opportunities

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for cooperation in the circumpolar world. The strategy casts the United States as an “exceptionally valuable partner in the Arctic” with which Canada has managed its differences responsibly since the Second World War. It also emphasizes opportunities for cooperation with Russia and “common interests” with European Arctic states, as well as a shared commitment to international law. Implicitly, this confirms that bilateral and multilateral engagement is key to stability and security in the region. “We’re not going down a road toward confrontation,” Foreign Affairs minister Cannon emphasized. “Indeed, we’re going down a road toward co-operation and collaboration. That is the Canadian way. And that’s the way my other colleagues around the table have chosen to go as well.” Cannon insisted that his government saw the Arctic as an “absolute priority” and that the needs of Northerners would be at the heart of Arctic policy.¹¹

Canada’s Arctic foreign policy (2010)

The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) released its *Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy* in August 2010. This document emphasizes the importance of the Arctic in Canada’s national identity and its role as an “Arctic power.” The overall message mirrors the Northern Strategy, outlining a vision for the Arctic as “a stable, rules-based region with clearly defined boundaries, dynamic economic growth and trade, vibrant Northern communities, and healthy and productive ecosystems.” These themes – which bear striking resemblance to the *The Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy* released in 2000 – reinforce that the strategic messaging from Ottawa reflects an approach to circumpolar issues that began under the Liberals and has been pushed more forcefully by the Conservatives. Implementing a vision that supports sovereignty, security and stewardship will entail on-going discussions about how to balance the interests of the Arctic states, Northern peoples, non-Arctic states and organizations, development and transportation companies, and other groups with interests in the region. Implementing a vision will also require moving beyond messaging and into action.

Predictably, the first and foremost pillar of Canada’s foreign policy is “the exercise of our sovereignty over the Far North.” But the “hard security” message that had figured prominently in earlier statements is muted, and the tone of cooperation with circumpolar neighbours and Northerners rings loudest. Accordingly, the statement commits Canada to “seek to resolve boundary issues in the Arctic region, in accordance with international law” and to secure its rights to the extended continental shelf. Ottawa upped the political ante by suggesting an urgent need to deal with outstanding boundary issues – particularly in the wake of the Russia-Norway agreement on their boundary in the Barents Sea. While these well-managed disputes pose no acute sovereignty or security concerns to Canada, most commentators see them as a political liability.



In terms of safety and security issues, the statement emphasizes that Canada would work with international partners bilaterally and through multilateral bodies like the Arctic Council. If cooperation fails, however, the document reiterates that Canada will defend its rights and interests.

Other dimensions of the *Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy* reflect the interaction between domestic and international agendas in Canada’s Arctic strategy. Trade and investment in resource development – one of the primary catalysts for the surge in Arctic interest over the previous decade – are upheld as main priorities. This obviously requires a framework of international cooperation in the region: it is unlikely that Canada can “create appropriate international conditions for sustainable development” in a region beset with intense competition and conflict. Furthermore, international events (particularly the catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010 and debates over oil drilling off the west coast of Greenland) have generated public concerns about the potential environmental consequences of oil and gas development in the region. “On the controversial issue of hydrocarbon development, we are realistic,” Inuit spokesperson Mary Simon explains. And:

“We need non-renewable resource development if we are to achieve economic self-sufficiency. But the terms of such development must ensure the protection of our environment and the continuation of our way of life. On that, there can be no compromise.”¹²

Despite the official assurances that the core of *Canada’s Northern Strategy* is first and foremost about people, Northern indigenous groups continue to express concerns about their involvement in national and international decision-making. Inuit representatives, for example, suggest that the government agenda prioritizes military investments at the expense of environmental protection and

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improved social and economic conditions in the north. They insist that “sovereignty begins at home” and that the primary challenges are domestic human security issues, requiring investments in infrastructure, education, and health care. Furthermore, the Inuit Circumpolar Council’s transnational *Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic* (2009) emphasized that

“the inextricable linkages between issues of sovereignty and sovereign rights in the Arctic and Inuit self-determination and other rights require states to accept the presence and role of Inuit as partners in the conduct of international relations in the Arctic.”

The declaration envisions the Inuit playing an active role in all deliberations on environmental security, sustainable development, militarization, shipping, and socio-economic development.¹³ Inuit representatives have opposed state actions that they feel violate their interests, such as Canada’s decision to host a meeting for the five Arctic coastal states in March 2010 without inviting Inuit and First Nations to the discussions, and even critiqued a bilateral Canada-Denmark Arctic defence and security cooperation agreement because they were not involved in negotiating it. As such, indigenous voices add to the complexity of the Canadian message projected to the rest of the world.

Although the post-Ilulissat political discourse in Canada has explicitly emphasized circumpolar cooperation and faith in legal frameworks to resolve disputes, senior politicians’ statements continue to intimate potential conflict. Academic proponents of the “sovereignty on thinning ice” school have largely abandoned their earlier arguments that Canadian sovereignty might be a casualty of climate change and foreign challenges, but elected officials persist with a threat narrative. Even Minister of Foreign Affairs Lawrence Cannon’s speeches, which emphasize and promote circumpolar cooperation, assert the need to defend against Russian activities that purportedly “push the envelope” and “challenge” Canadian sovereignty and security. These alleged threats are mobilized to affirm that the Canadian Forces have a “real role” to play in defending our Northern sovereignty.¹⁴ Like much of the government’s rhetoric, however, the precise nature of this role, and the nature of Russian and other international “threats,” remains ambiguous.

Future challenges and questions

Official policy statements set expectations and point to desired outcomes. In the end, their credibility is measured by the actions that they inspire. Does the combination of the *Northern Strategy* and the *Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy* represent a new era in Canada’s engagement with the circumpolar world, moving beyond narrow sovereignty and security preoccupations? Will promised investments in improved Arctic military capabilities

survive the government’s recent emphasis on eliminating deficit spending? If a sense of urgent sovereignty or security “crisis” abates, will the government be able to sustain popular support for its Northern strategy? Balancing an Arctic security agenda with domestic imperatives to improve the quality of life of Northerners, and converting a broad strategy into deliverables that produce a more constructive and secure circumpolar world, are real challenges facing Canada in the twenty-first century Arctic.

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