

North American Arctic Maritime Security: Developing the North West Passage with the United States¹

According to the US National Snow and Ice Center, the current ice coverage of the Arctic Ocean measured today is the least recorded in satellite history. We may well be on track for a total ice minimum by late summer 2016.

The shrinking extent, volume and hardness of Arctic ice has been clear for the last 30 years at least, and is one of the most rapid and dramatic geophysical changes in human memory. If this continues, the Arctic Ocean could be free of ice in the summer in 20 or 30 years and transit much easier throughout the year. National measures reducing GHG emissions will have no effect on this medium term outcome.

Canada and the United States have under-reacted to the long term problems and opportunities this maritime change portends, including national security, because a correct reaction would be expensive, long term and draw resources from traditional priorities.

Canada has been largely concerned with laudable identity, governance and social issues at the expense of economic development and investments in national security the Canadian Arctic over the last 30 years. Captain Sir John Franklin's dream of a new shorter passage through Canadian and US waters between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and more recent hopes for expanded sustainable resource development based on improved access, remain largely unfulfilled.

On the other side of the Arctic Ocean, President Putin has personally pushed hard for Russian exploitation of the opening of the melting Arctic Ocean to strengthen Russia's economic and military presence in the Arctic as a solution to Russia's traditional maritime isolation and to facilitate a return to super power status.

Russia has invested billions in nuclear and smaller icebreakers and naval vessels for the Northern Fleet, in Arctic oil and gas development, and in new legal and physical structures to promote commercialization of the Northern Sea Route. Plans have been made for an ice-capable aircraft carrier.

Moscow has centralized control over regions and departments responsible for Arctic matters, and has carried out large complex military exercises with a scenario involving military acquisition and occupation of Arctic territory.

¹ Given the wealth of sensible submissions to Canada's Defence Policy Review, this paper – in some contrast – is an “outside the box” forward-looking vision of the melting Arctic Ocean and consequential strategic issues Canada will face in the next 20 to 30 years and what we should do about it now. Like the lesson of the British guns in Singapore pointing in the wrong direction during WW II, military planners should never assume the future will be like the present or the past.

Only the precipitous drop in world oil and gas prices and sanctions have slowed the pace – but not changed the goal – of Russian military, energy and transportation hegemony in the Arctic Ocean, unconstrained by environmental or local forces.

For Canada, the North West Passage remains dangerous, underdeveloped, poorly charted, without deep water ports, lacking SAR capacities, and without modern and integrated maritime awareness and satellite communications and navigation systems.

In August 2016, the large ocean liner *Crystal Serenity* will make an unprecedented transit of the North West Passage. While the company and the Canadian and American authorities have taken every precaution, the thought of an accident, whose only points of refuge would be tiny Inuit communities, is sobering.

Large Arctic maritime infrastructure projects have not been highlighted by Canada's new government so far. For budgetary and procurement reasons, the planned new Coast Guard heavy icebreaker and the smaller ice-capable Naval patrol vessels may well be further delayed.

The case for civilian Canadian Arctic marine and terrestrial corridors and related infrastructure to encourage responsible Arctic economic and social development is strong as set out, for example, in the Northern chapter of former Minister David Emerson's excellent review of the Canada Transportation Act.

However, Canadian Arctic governance is highly decentralized among federal departments, territorial governments and influential Inuit organizations, pro-Arctic public opinion is fractured among Indigenous and local residents, developers, experts and environmentalists; the needs of the Arctic are often submerged by southern political priorities and needs. The arguments for improved Arctic access has been weakened by companies pulling out of the Arctic poor oil and commodity prices, and increased challenge by southern environmental and indigenous groups.

Strategically, there are of course no near term surface marine threats to the North American Arctic. The Russians are well behaved on the diplomatic track including playing a positive role in the Arctic Council and respecting the United Nations process on marine territorial disputes related to the extended continental shelf. However, the messages delivered inside Russia emphasize encirclement by NATO.

What has changed in dealing with Russia is the widened spectrum of long term geopolitical possibilities suggested by its activities in Ukraine, Syria, Scandinavia and the ultra-nationalist authoritarian trend evident in its domestic actions and rhetoric. Russian Arctic collaboration has strengthened remarkably with China for strategic rather than purely economic reasons over the last couple of years, a long term worry for some.

The United States defense establishment been giving increased attention to these changes and sees Russia as once again the number one existential threat to the United States, trumping China, failed and rogue states and terrorism.

Although publicly the US describes the Arctic as a low tension area and the Navy's role as largely supportive, there is increased internal concern, planning and technical effort related to long term impact of the opening of the Arctic Ocean on effective deterrence in the new, open Arctic Ocean. Submarines are not enough and a Navy surface capability will almost certainly be developed.

The Obama Administration has coincidentally paid increased diplomatic attention to the Arctic under the impetus of the President's climate change priority, particularly his Glacier Summit in Alaska. His Arctic leadership has permeated the Administration.

During the recent Obama-Trudeau Summit important statements were released announcing sharply increased bilateral cooperation on Arctic issues, especially mitigating effects of climate change.

The change in tone opens a window of opportunity for discussion of a modernization and expansion of Arctic maritime security cooperation with the United States, including joint development and administration of a Canada-US North West Passage Administration for strategic as well as economic reasons. NORAD provides a base and the joint management of the St. Lawrence Seaway a model for such Arctic cooperation.

A carefully charted and managed NWP would allow for rapid movement of US naval assets including aircraft carriers between the Atlantic and Pacific theaters, and serve as an anchor for other joint Arctic defence initiatives responding to possible new strategic challenges appearing because of the melting Arctic Ocean.

As it did for the Alaska Highway and the DEW line, Canada would expect the United States to contribute significantly to the costs of this marine highway proportional to its interests and means.

Freer American access to Canadian territory building on existing integrated air and naval defence cooperation would buy more good will for Canada than any other single policy decision. It would directly address the charge that we are free riders, and are not doing enough to protect America's Northern flank.

This is an attractive option for Canada, which usually heads for the head when the dinner bill is presented.

A Canada-US North West Passage initiative would serve various Canadian economic and nation-building purposes besides national security, but the modernized NWP's

main role would be to serve as a balance to Russian naval, shipping, oil, gas and mineral hegemony in the new Arctic.

Needless to say this signature Canada-US continental initiative would be one of many complementary actions to respond to the unbalanced strategic picture that is appearing in the Arctic Region.

Complementary measures would include:

- Accelerate the construction of Arctic-capable Navy and Canadian Coast Guard vessels,
- negotiating a bilateral agreement on renewing the NWS with special attention to maritime awareness,
- modernizing the treaties on Canada-US-NATO Arctic military cooperation, including opening the NWP to pre-cleared allied and partner naval vessels without prejudice to outstanding maritime legal issues,
- agreeing to US ABM sensors on Canadian soil,
- resolving the dispute with the US over the Alaska-Yukon maritime boundary,
- hardening Canadian Arctic airport runways for joint military use,
- strengthening existing robust cooperation on ASW and,
- expanding the joint use of un-manned air and subsea vehicles.

Once again, this vision is simply prudent planning against an unknowable future, not provocation towards Russia or China, where we hope that bilateral cooperation and international institutions such as the Arctic Council will dissolve animosities and magnify synergies over time. In time, a CSCE – like Arctic Security Forum could emerge.