

Some Hard but Unavoidable Arctic Issues

As Canada prepares to undertake its defence review, it remains critically important to ensure that a proper consideration be made regarding the future of Arctic security. Canada is an arctic nation and therefore the defence of the arctic is central to the defence of the country.

For almost two decades, the arctic region has been an area of international peace and cooperation. The end of the cold war has resulted in significant efforts to build an international regime based on new international arrangements and cooperation. This period of peace and cooperation has convinced many that the arctic region will always remain peaceful. Unfortunately, regardless of the new institutions such as the Arctic Council, this period of cooperation is coming to a close. Both the United States and Russia have begun to engage upon the protection of their core security requirements that require the utilization of arctic space. Even more unfortunately, the core security interests of the two states are now beginning to conflict.

This means that the arctic is regaining its significance as a geopolitical area of operation. Both the Americans and the Russians have increased their submarine forces that are able to operate in the region as well as their aircraft capabilities. This new reality requires that Canada needs to rethink for some of its ongoing focus on cooperation in the region. As relationships continue to deteriorate between Russia and the United States owing to such activities such as the Russian intervention in Ukraine, the arctic region will not be able to maintain its position as one of the most cooperative regions in the international system. Canada now needs to ensure that it is able to provide for its arctic security into the future.

Two arctic related issues that absolutely need to be discussed between the two countries – the modernization of NORAD; and the northern focus of NATO – unfortunately will probably not be on the agenda but should be.

1) Modernization of NORAD: The need to modernize NORAD has become increasingly apparent since 2007 when the Russian Government decided to recommence its long range bomber patrols over the Arctic Ocean up to Canadian and American Arctic airspace. There have been suggestions that prior to the crisis in Ukraine, Canadian and American officials had quietly asked Russian officials to provide prior notification of these patrols. At that time, even when relationships between the three countries were at their best, the Russians refused this request even though this could have been an important confidence building measure. Following the Ukrainian crisis, the Russian patrols have become more numerous, and sometimes include fighter escorts – something that did not even occur during the Cold War. The Russians have also continued to test their submarine launched ballistic missiles in arctic waters, including a test launch for later this week. There have also been indications that they are also testing their new submarine launched cruise missiles in the region (which have been showcased in their Syrian campaign). All of these events have demonstrated that there remains a need to maintain and upgrade NORAD's surveillance capability. For Canada this means improving a surveillance system that was last upgraded in 1985. It also means that Canada needs to make a decision on the replacements of its existing fleet of F-18s. Such decisions are going to be expensive. At the same time it is highly unlikely that the Americans will be as generous as they have been in the past for helping to pay for Canada's upgrades. This is why we need to begin talking about NORAD modernization sooner rather than later.

2) NATO, the Arctic and Canada: The second issue that requires attention is on NATO's role in the arctic. Former Prime Minister Harper had made it clear that he did not accept an expanded role of NATO into the region. However events may force Prime Minister Trudeau to rethink this position. Following the Ukrainian crisis, both Finland and Sweden reported increasing violations of both their airspace and maritime zones by Russian forces. Sweden has been increasingly wrestling with the issue of self-defense to the point where its former chief of its armed forces in 2013 openly stated that

Sweden could not defend itself against attack. This was immediately followed by a statement by the Secretary General of NATO who publicly pointed out that the alliance would only come to the assistance of full members, of which Sweden was not. There are emerging signs that both countries are seriously considering seeking membership in the alliance. If this comes to be, the challenges for both Canada and United States are substantial. If Canada were to turn down the application of either of the two northern democracies while they have been willing to accept countries such as Montenegro or Albania, the only reasonable explanation would be because of concerns regarding our relationship with Russia. The question that follows - what would be the ultimate message that would be sent? And if the decision was made to accept one or both of the northern neutrals, then Canada need to be prepared for the Russian reaction. It is hard to see how much could be accomplished in organization like the Arctic Council if the Russian believed that they were now surrounded by 7 NATO Arctic countries in that body. It is clear there are no easy solutions. The best may appear to bunker down and “hope” that Sweden and/or Finland do not make such a request, but basing foreign policy on “hope” alone often has dangerous outcomes. Rather Canada needs to be thinking about this difficult problem early so that they can make the best informed decision rather than simply having to react.