

Commentary

Canada & the Arctic

Andrea Charron

Making sense of the world these days is a bit like trying to drink from a fire hose; overwhelming doesn't begin to describe the result. Questions about what are the options for Canada with respect to the Trump Presidency are often framed using victim-like language: Canada is at the mercy of its much bigger neighbour. However, Trump's presidency poses potential opportunities for Canada and one such area is with regards to joint issues of concerning facing the Arctic.

The good news is that the latest U.S. Department of Defense Arctic strategy starts with the statement "The Department of Defense (DoD) remains committed to working collaboratively with allies and partners to promote a balanced approach to improving security in the Arctic region".¹ While written under the Obama Administration, there is no indication that this sentiment won't continue under the Trump Administration primarily because it is focused on other issues (such as North Korea and football protests) and because the Arctic is not a priority for the President. Many of the eight Arctic states are allies of the U.S. and the biggest Arctic power, Russia, commands notice by Trump. Ultimately, the U.S. wants the Arctic to remain a secure and stable region where U.S. national interests are safeguarded, the U.S. homeland is defended, and states work cooperatively to address challenges.

And Trump, in line with his "grand" strategy, wants to achieve this by spending more on the military. This is to the benefit of Canada in so far as it might encourage the U.S. to contribute financially and via research and development to a replacement/upgrade of NORAD's North Warning System – one of the main sources of air and aerospace warning information for both states. Furthermore, U.S. military objectives support national interests which encompass a wide range of activities, including economic activities such as resource extraction, fishing and trade, as well as scientific research, aid to community resupply, search and rescue as well as national defence. Indeed, the NORAD exercise "Vigilant Shield" in 2016, focused on Canadian and U.S. forces working together with the assistance of refueling services in Thule, Greenland in joint surveillance roles in Arctic waters to improve Arctic maritime domain awareness. U.S. military

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involvement in the Arctic does not mean armed-to-the-teeth military vessels steaming down the Northwest Passage.

Sadly, it is the US Coast Guard that is in desperate need of money to replace its aging “fleet” of icebreakers but is unlikely to receive that support. It has only 2 operating icebreakers: the USCGC *Healy* and the *Polar Star*² which share duties in the Antarctic and Arctic. In October 2016, the US Coast Guard released a notional schedule for the heavy polar acquisition program showing delivery of the first of three heavy polar icebreakers in fiscal year 2023 but this now seems to be all for naught.

What is an adjustment for Canada-U.S. relations in the Arctic is a shift away from uniting on issues of climate change promoted by Prime Minister Trudeau and former President Obama to the issue of responsible tourism in the Arctic. Trump is keen to allow oil and gas exploration to proceed in Alaska. Exploration in Canada’s Arctic, however, is now banned. Royal Dutch Shell has relinquished its drilling leases in Canada’s Lancaster Sound transferring them to *Nature Conservancy Canada*,³ oil prices are still depressed (hovering currently at about \$50/barrel), Canada has fewer gas and oil deposits than elsewhere in the Arctic, coupled with the government’s pledge to protect more marine spaces means there is little room for dialogue between Canada and the US on fossil fuel extraction. Nevertheless, responsible resource development is a key issue for the Arctic Council and all indications are that the U.S. will continue to participate in this forum, even if less enthusiastically than was the case under the Obama Administration.

This leaves Arctic tourism as the area of convergence on which the US and Canada may concentrate. Tourism is on the rise. The very successful, but government resource intensive and expensive transit of the luxury cruise liner the *Crystal Serenity* from Anchorage, Alaska, through the Northwest Passage to Thule and then New York was repeated this summer at an average cost per passenger of over US\$22,000.⁴ This requires very close coordination with coastguards, customs and border personnel and the militaries (for aerial search and rescue scenarios) of all three states. A military confrontation is not the concern. Rather, it is more mundane issues that demand larger government resources. Demands such as: ensuring there are adequate navigational aids, designating a route that limits disruption to migrating marine species, enforcing the now mandatory Polar Code and even coordinating penalties for marine pollution and dumping between the U.S., Canada and Greenland to ensure that the less professional, fly-by-night companies aren’t encouraged to dump in jurisdictions with softer penalties. Working with the U.S. and Greenland to coordinate future voyages will continue to be an important point of convergence given this very popular transit route.

For Canadians, however, nothing grabs the headlines like perceived concern for Russia’s (presumed nefarious) designs on the Arctic. Despite demonstrating time and again that it has adhered to international law with respect to Arctic issues (e.g., the Ilulissat Declaration of the five Arctic coastal states,⁵ the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea - UNCLOS, which the U.S. has yet to adopt formally - and the process for delimiting extended continental shelves), Russia’s activities in Syria and Ukraine are presented as evidence of its intent to threaten the Arctic with military confrontation as well. We need to unpack this flawed, slippery slope connection.

First, the activities of Russia in Syria and Ukraine are reprehensible. Full stop. Yes, Russia has the potential to hit major North American centres with an arsenal of missiles. They are not, however, *de facto* evidence of designs around the globe or for the Arctic. Russia is opportunistic, seizing on

frozen conflicts from the Cold War, its near abroad and especially states with pro-Russian, usually authoritarian leadership, to exploit and undermine fractured populations along national lines. The Arctic does not fit this profile. Indeed, similar to how we frame Canada's Arctic (devoid of English/French differences and unique from the rest of Canada), Russia mythologizes its Arctic to posit a singular history of pride overcoming adversity that glosses over growing ethnic divides among its minority groups and tense relationships with its Indigenous peoples.

Second, Russia has high hopes that the Arctic will be a potential fix for what is looking like economic collapse. With three rivers the size of the Mississippi draining into the Arctic basin and a Northern Sea Route that links Russia to China and Europe, Russia is hoping that its port cities, like Murmansk, and the Northern Sea Route are the economic engines that will save the Russian economy.

Third, the Arctic is a region that Russia dominates because of the size of its Arctic territory, its large Arctic population⁶ and its 41+ icebreakers (6 of which are heavy polar, nuclear powered vessels). The Arctic is the one issue area in which it is a peer to the U.S. – indeed, Russia is the Arctic power.⁷ Its expansion/refurbishment of its northern bases is not unlike Canadian and U.S. spending on military equipment and bases as an economic stimulus. More to the point, Russia's general military buildup is a convenient way to whip up nationalism and divert its public's attention away from the lack of services, increasingly closed government and poor results in nearly all measures of health and economic status. The expansion and buildup must be tracked, of course. Refusing to work with Russia on Arctic issues, however, would be counterproductive. Not only is Russia essential to tackling some of the common issues in the Arctic, like improving health indicators, telecommunication and important scientific research, but it represents a safe topic on which other geopolitical issues could be broached.

So where does this leave Canada?

Neither Canada nor the U.S. can operate self-sufficiently in the Arctic should there be a major search and rescue or oil spill scenario. They need to work collaboratively via NORAD and many hundreds of bilateral agreements with many different departments. They also need the help of allies and partners which, in the Arctic, means Russia. Canada may need to remind the U.S. its Arctic issues extend beyond resource exploration. And all three states need to continue to focus on the important issues of environmental protection and sustainable development as Finland assumes the position of Chair of the Arctic Council from the U.S. for 2017 – 2019. Most importantly, the U.S., Canada and Russia must try to seek opportunities for dialogue on areas in the world that are facing military confrontation by building on the cooperation that exists in the Arctic.

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Defense (December, 2016). Report to Congress on Strategy to Protect United States National Security Interests in the Arctic Region. *OUSD (Policy)*. Retrieved from, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016-Arctic-Strategy-UNCLAS-cleared-for-release.pdf>.

2. The *Healy* is a medium polar icebreaker and the *Polar Star* is a heavy polar icebreaker. The US's second heavy polar icebreaker, *Polar Sea*, suffered an engine casualty in June 2010 and remains non-operational. See Roland O'Rourke, "Coast Guard Polar Icebreaker Modernization: Background and Issues for Congress" (14 September 2017).
3. See Mike De Souza (8 June, 2016). Shell Relinquishes Canadian Arctic Drilling Rights. *National Observer*. Retrieved from, <http://www.nationalobserver.com/2016/06/08/news/shell-relinquishes-canadian-arctic-drilling-rights>.
4. Crystal Cruise. *Northwest Passage Explorer*. Retrieved from, <http://www.crystalcruises.com/voyage/details/northwest-passage-explorer-7320>
5. See *The Ilulissat Declaration* (28 May, 2008). Retrieved from, http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat_Declaration.pdf. In a nutshell, the five Arctic Coast states noted the many areas of policy convergence and agreed the current legal framework outlined by UNCLOS served as the best guide for conflict avoidance.
6. Russia has approximately half of the 4 million people who live in the Arctic but Russia has seen a 10% decline in its population since 2010, whereas the U.S. and Canada have seen a 15 and 10% increase respectively. Note Nunavut is the fastest growing Arctic region seeing a 20% increase in population since 2010. See *Arctic Human Development Report: Human Processes and Global Linkages* (2015). Joan Nymand Larsen & Gail Fondahl (Eds.) *Nordic Council Meeting of Ministers* (Chapter 2). <http://www.sdwg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/AHDRIIFINALREPORT2015-02-24.pdf>.
7. See Andrea Charron, Joël Plouffe & Stéphane Roussel. (2017). Russian National Interests and the Arctic: Foreign Policy Implications for Canada. In C. Kirkey & M. Hawes (Eds.). *Canadian Foreign Policy in a Unipolar World* (pp. 55-75). Oxford: Oxford University Press.