

Arctic: Canada Leads NATO Confrontation With Russia

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Continuing the pattern by top Canadian federal officials over the past year of issuing blunt and bravado statements aimed at Russia over the Arctic, on August 1 Defence Minister Peter MacKay was paraphrased as “warn[ing] Russia that Canuck fighter jets will scramble to meet any unauthorized aircraft” as a mainstream Canadian news agency less than delicately phrased it, and thundered that “Canadian fighter jets would scramble to ‘meet’ any Russian aircraft ‘approaching’ Canada’s airspace.” [1]

MacKay said that “We’re going to protect our sovereign territory,” [2] though transparently the message was directed solely against Russia, which in no manner endangers Canada’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and not the United States, which does.

In another account of MacKay’s comments, this time indicating that he was speaking in response to a report that Russia plans to drop a small detachment of paratroopers almost a year from now in a part of the Arctic it has internationally recognized rights to, the defence chief was quoted as saying “We have scrambled F-18 jets in the past, and they’ll always be there to meet them.” [3]

He appears to have grabbed what passes in Ottawa as a rhetorical flourish from the wrong context, however, that of “protecting Canadian airspace” from Russian long-range bombers flying in international airspace in a fashion that doesn’t violate either Canada’s territory or any treaty or law. Though the same report concedes that “MacKay said there have been no recent intrusions of Russian bombers.” [4]

MacKay’s latest saber rattling is fully in keeping with a string of comparable diatribes from the trio of Canada’s prime, defence and foreign ministers going back a year to the five-day war between Georgia and Russia, revealingly enough.

Last August Prime Minister Stephen Harper accused Russia of reverting to a “Soviet-era mentality” and the next month MacKay followed suit with “When we see a Russian Bear [Tupolev Tu-95] approaching Canadian air space, we meet them with an F-18.” It’s now been nearly a year of Canada’s defence minister threatening Russia with F-18s, multirole fighter jets produced by Chicago-based Boeing. MacKay brandishing US warplanes is proper to the circumstances as he is also reflecting and representing American and NATO designs on the Arctic and against Russian claims and interests there.

This February Barack Obama paid his first visit outside the United States as president of the country, visiting Ottawa and Prime Minister Harper. The latter’s government chose that occasion to stage a contrived stunt that in a more serious situation would have signaled a

lead-up to war or that could have precipitated one. Canada scrambled warplanes over the Arctic Ocean to intercept and turn back Russian bombers engaged in what since 2007 have been routine flights in neutral airspace.

With the newly inaugurated American president present to guarantee maximum attention in the world media, the Canadian prime minister said, "We will defend our airspace, we also have obligations of continental defence with the United States. We will fulfil those obligations to defend our continental airspace, and we will defend our sovereignty and we will respond every time the Russians make any kind of intrusion on the sovereignty in Canada's Arctic." [5]

The Russian planes in question in no manner intruded into Canadian airspace and as such didn't threaten the nation's "sovereignty."

That Harper highlighted "obligations of continental defence with the United States" in reference to the visit of the US president and some fantastical "threat" posed by a Russian bomber several thousand kilometers away from the Canadian capital where Obama was at the time perhaps was intended to both prove Ottawa's value to its southern neighbor - after all, Harper and MacKay postured as having saved the American head of state from a fictitious Russian bombing run - and to demonstrate that as "continental defence" is a reciprocal affair the world superpower stood behind it in any future confrontation with Russia.

The third member of Canada's bellicose triumvirate, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lawrence Cannon, who while addressing Russia in March stated "Let's be perfectly clear here. Canada will not be bullied," at the end of this June referred to Canada as both an Arctic and an energy "superpower."

A Canadian newswire service at the time wrote that "Downplaying Russia's recent 'jockeying' for position in the emerging polar oil rush, Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon has declared Canada an 'Arctic superpower.'" [6]

“With Denmark becoming the latest nation to reveal major plans to sharpen its Arctic military capabilities, a global buildup in the tools of northern warfare has experts concerned about an increased risk of conflict.” [7]

Last year Norway purchased 48 Lockheed F-35 fighter jets “because of their suitability for Arctic patrols. In March, that country held a major Arctic military practice involving 7,000 soldiers from 13 countries in which a fictional country called Northland seized offshore oil rigs.

“The manoeuvres prompted a protest from Russia – which objected again in June after Sweden held its largest northern military exercise since the end of the Second World War. About 12,000 troops, 50 aircraft and several warships were involved.” [8]

The above follows closely on the heels of NATO’s secretary general and top military commanders meeting in Iceland on January 28-29 of this year and conducting a Seminar on Security Prospects in the High North, at which then NATO chief Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stated:

“[T]he High North is going to require even more of the Alliance’s attention in the coming years.

“As the ice-cap decreases, the possibility increases of extracting the High North’s mineral wealth and energy deposits.

“At our Summit in Bucharest last year, we agreed a number of guiding principles for NATO’s role in energy security....” [9]

The NATO meeting, which for the first time explicitly targeted the Arctic Circle as a area of operations for the Alliance, was held seventeen days after the outgoing Bush administration issued National Security Presidential Directive 66 which included the assertion that “The United States has broad and fundamental national security interests in the Arctic region....These interests include such matters as missile defense and early warning; deployment of sea and air systems for strategic sealift, strategic deterrence, maritime presence, and maritime security operations; and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight.” [10]

The National Security Directive openly contests Canada’s claim that the Northwest Passage, which because of the melting of the polar ice cap is now fully navigable for the first time in recorded history, is its exclusive territory and calls for the internationalization of the strategic waterway.

If Canadian sovereignty and territorial integrity are threatened by any nation that country is the United States and not Russia.

With the possibility of Canada’s opposition Liberals calling for a no-confidence vote in the parliament next month and triggering a snap election, incumbent Prime Minister Harper is intensifying the theme of “reinforc[ing] Canadian sovereignty in the eastern Arctic” and will attend this month’s annual Arctic military exercises, Operation Nanook, along with Defence Minister MacKay and Chief of Defence Staff Walter Natynczyk.

In order to “get a close look this month at Canada’s efforts to beef up its military presence

in the Arctic,” Harper will be taken by helicopter to the month-long drills and deposited on the frigate HMCS Toronto as well as visiting the submarine HMCS Charlottetown.

“Government officials announced details of the Harper’s Aug. 17-21 tour, amid mounting tensions with Russia over Arctic territorial claims.” [11].

This year Operation Nanook will be a full spectrum operation with Canadian army, navy and air force participation and special forces engaged for the first time. The exercises will include the amphibious landing of an Arctic Reserve Company Group, anti-submarine exercises, air support operations and a mass casualty exercise. [12]

Again recalling that the United States is Canada’s chief rival for control of the Northwest Passage, in late July the U.S. State Department revealed “The United States and Canada will begin in August a 42-day joint expedition to the Arctic to survey the continental shelf in the Arctic” and that “The mission, scheduled from August 6 to September 16, will continue the collaboration in extended continental shelf data collection in the Arctic started during last summer’s joint survey, with plans for further cooperation in 2010.” [13]

In late June when Foreign Minister Cannon touted Canada as an Arctic superpower he revealed by exclusion which nation was targeted by his country and its NATO allies when he praised “the benefits of joint research with American scientists in waters near the Alaska-Yukon border and with Danish scientists near Greenland.....On the thorny question of who owns the Northwest Passage – the route through the Arctic archipelago that Canada considers its ‘internal waters’ Cannon said there’s currently no plan to try to dissuade the U.S. from its view that the route is an ‘international strait’ beyond any one country’s control.” [14]

The last sentence dispels any serious consideration of Ottawa’s claims concerning sovereignty and territorial rights.

With Canada budgeting hundreds of millions of dollars to build an Arctic military training center in Resolute Bay, for “new northern warships and military infrastructure and...its own dedicated Arctic unit based in Yellowknife, N.W.T. (Northwest Territories),” [15] the Polar Epsilon satellite surveillance program and advanced aerial drones in the Arctic, its American partner has been complementing its efforts.

In mid-July U.S. Air Force commander Lt. Gen. Dana Atkins spoke of “the importance of having a strong military presence in the Arctic, and the military’s reaction to continuing coastal flights by the Russian Air Force.”

Explaining what the true U.S. and NATO objectives in the region are, he added “the Arctic will become increasingly strategically important in the future, not just because of the estimated trillions of dollars worth of untapped oil and natural gas under its surface, but also because of increased shipping opportunities in the area,” which could permit “A ship traveling from Asia to Europe [to] cut its costs in half traveling this route rather through the Panama Canal.” [16]

Atkins advocated a deep water port on the North Slope (bordering the Arctic) that was “needed to better defend the region.” [17]

Also in the middle of last month the Pentagon held its Northern Edge war games in Alaska, “situated between Russia and Canada, and within a good part of the Arctic Circle,” with over

9,000 troops, warships and warplanes.

“Air Force, Navy, Army, Marine Corps and Coast Guard personnel participated with aircraft flying in simulated air combat, many times flying in excess of the speed of sound, a restriction found nearly everywhere else in the United States.

“Naval warships and land-based forces also synchronized with aircraft in creating a large combined force.” [18]

To demonstrate that far more is at stake than the largest portion of the world’s untapped oil and natural gas reserves and new international commerce-transforming shipping lanes, while the U.S. military exercises were being conducted in Alaska Russia held large-scale nuclear submarine drills under the Arctic ice cap which included “several nuclear-powered attack submarines...deployed in the launch area to provide security for...two strategic submarines” launching ballistic missiles and which helped the latter avoid detection by U.S. defenses. [19]

“A Russian intelligence source earlier said the region around the North Pole is the perfect place for launches of ballistic missiles because it allows the submarines to arrive in a designated area undetected and to shorten the missile flight time to the target.” [20]

Russia is the only nation in the world with a nuclear triad – strategic bombers, land-based long-range ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles – capable of defending itself against a nuclear first strike by the U.S. and its allies.

A standard online description of the need for such a system says, “The purpose of having a trifurcated nuclear capability is to significantly reduce the possibility that an enemy could destroy all of a country’s nuclear forces in a first strike attack; this, in turn, ensures a credible threat of a second strike, and thus increases a nation’s nuclear deterrence.” [21]

With the development of an international interceptor missile system, to say nothing of the weaponization of space, the U.S. and its military allies in NATO and what has come to be called Asian NATO are deploying missile interceptor and radar bases in the Czech Republic, Poland, Norway, Britain, Alaska (including the Aleutian Islands), Japan, Australia and elsewhere that could render Russian – and Chinese – nuclear deterrence and retaliation capabilities useless and thus lay the groundwork for a nuclear first strike to be launched with presumed impunity.

The Arctic Circle is where Russia is concentrating its last line of defense against such a threat. If the U.S. and NATO, employing Canada as their advance guard, confront and expel Russia from the Arctic the possibility of nuclear blackmail and unprovoked attacks increase exponentially.

The role assigned to Canada is to serve as either bait in a trap or as agent provocateur to trigger a confrontation with Russia which the U.S. and NATO, the first through bilateral defense agreements and the second through the Alliance’s Article 5 mutual military assistance clause, would respond to.

Canada, with a population of 33 million, would then be portrayed as a small and defenseless victim of resurgent “Russian imperialism” much as with Estonia and Georgia on the Baltic and Black Seas, respectively.

After returning from visits to Ukraine and Georgia, both bordering Russia and both being promoted for full NATO membership by the United States, last month Vice President Joseph Biden gave an interview with the Wall Street Journal in which he said of Russia that “It’s a very difficult thing to deal with loss of empire” – this from the second-in-command of the world’s preeminent global superpower with hundreds of thousands of troops around and hundreds of military bases dotting the planet.

He went on to forecast what could have been lifted verbatim from Zbigniew Brzezinski’s 1999 *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives* and its claim that Russia, “an unnatural political entity,” was marked for fragmentation and eventual extinction.

“They have a shrinking population base, they have a withering economy, they have a banking sector and structure that is not likely to be able to withstand the next 15 years, they’re in a situation where the world is changing before them and they’re clinging to something in the past that is not sustainable.”

“This country, Russia, is in a very different circumstance than it has been any time in the last 40 years, or longer.” [22]

Biden’s support for the ‘color revolution’ leaders of Ukraine and Georgia – one, Mikheil Saakashvili, a former U.S. resident and the other, Viktor Yushchenko, married to a native of Chicago and former Reagan and George H.W. Bush official – fits into this scenario nicely. He demanded that Russian peacekeepers be withdrawn from Abkhazia and South Ossetia and delivered the fiat that Russia would have no “sphere of influence” in the former Soviet Union, which is to say historical Russia. The fourteen former Soviet Republics aside from Russia are marked out by the U.S. and NATO as their turf.

“As we reset the relationship with Russia, we reaffirm our commitment to an independent Ukraine, and we recognize no sphere of influence or no ability of any other nation to veto the choices an independent nation makes,” Biden said in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. [23]

The choices he mentioned include, in fact are centered on, NATO integration and membership, which polls show are opposed by as many as 80% of Ukrainians.

Biden was the first major American official to visit Georgia after last August’s Georgian attack on South Ossetia and a five-day armed conflict between Georgia and Russia. While there he pledged \$1 billion in post-war aid and laid the groundwork for the United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership which was formalized last December.

In response to his most recent visit the Foreign Ministry of Abkhazia released a statement saying that “At the moment the US is using Saakashvili as an instrument to threaten the security of the Caucasus” and “The Georgian government is continuing its militarisation process and is drawing up plans for a revenge military intrusion into territories which do not belong to Georgia.” [24]

South Ossetia has reported the resumption of Georgian shelling of its capital and other parts of its territory shortly after Biden’s departure from Tbilisi and on August 3 South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity announced that Russian troops in his country would begin preventive drills. [25]

On the same day the Russian Defense Ministry published a statement saying “In case of

further provocative steps [on Georgia's part] threatening the republic's population and the Russian military contingent stationed in South Ossetia, the Russian Defense Ministry reserves the right to use all means and resources available to protect the citizens of the republic of South Ossetia and Russian servicemen." [26]

On August 4 Russia placed its troops in South Ossetia on full combat alert three days ahead of the first anniversary of the beginning of Georgia's assault there on August 7, 2008.

In neighboring Azerbaijan, bordering Russia and the Caspian Sea, it was announced on August 1 that "United States Naval Forces specialists will conduct exercises in Baku for the Special Task Forces of the Azerbaijani Navy" and will hold "exercises [that] will take place from August 15 to September 5 in accordance with a bilateral cooperation plan agreed between the two countries." [27]

Moving U.S. and NATO military infrastructure into Ukraine with its 2,300-kilometer border with Russia, Georgia and Azerbaijan would demonstrably advance the encirclement of Russia already underway in the Barents, Baltic, Black and Caspian Seas.

In the Baltic region NATO warplanes have conducted continuous patrols a few minutes' flight from Russia's second largest city, St. Petersburg, since 2004 and the Alliance opened a cyber warfare center in Estonia last year.

Last month the British Parliament issued a report that called for "robust contingency plans that cover the eventuality of attack on Baltic member states and that set out NATO's planned military response." [28]

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, like Georgia and Canada, have become the rallying points for the major Western military powers in bringing the entire military might of NATO against Russia on its western, southern and northern borders.

To Russia's east, at the same time that British parliamentarians were drawing up plans for NATO to invoke its Article 5 war provision in the Baltic Sea region, their Japanese counterparts adopted a bill officially recognizing the four Kuril Islands in the North Pacific, ceded to Russia after World War II, as Japanese "historical territory".

A Russian analyst said in response to the measure:

"The Kuril Islands are the strategic area for Russian nuclear submarines sailing from their home bases to the Pacific Ocean.

"If Russia gives any islands to Japan it will immediately create a precedent for Japan to demand Sakhalin and other islands of the Kuril belt up to Kamchatka." [29]

With its nuclear submarines dislodged from the Pacific and Arctic Oceans, Russia would be an even more tempting target for a conventional or nuclear first strike.

Canada's role is to spearhead the confrontation with Russia in the Arctic. If it succeeds, intentionally or by accident, in provoking an incident with its U.S.-supplied F-18s over Arctic waters and if that encounter escalates into a more serious crisis, the U.S. and NATO are prepared to back it up.

1) Canwest News Service, August 1, 2009

- 2) Ibid
- 3) Associated Press, August 1, 2009
- 4) Ibid
- 5) Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, February 27, 2009
- 6) Canwest News Service, June 28, 2009
- 7) Canadian Press, July 26, 2009
- 8) Canadian Press, July 26, 2009
- 9) NATO International, January 29, 2009
- 10) National Security Presidential Directive 66, January 12, 2009
<http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/nspd-66.htm>
- 11) Canadian Press, August 1, 2009
- 12) National Defence and the Canadian Forces, July 10, 2009
- 13) Russian Information Agency Novosti, July 23, 2009
- 14) Canwest News Service, June 28, 2009
- 15) Canadian Press, July 26, 2009
- 16) Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, July 15, 2009
- 17) Ibid
- 18) The Evening Times, July 17, 2009
- 19) Russian Information Agency Novosti, July 15, 2009
- 20) Ibid
- 21) Wikipedia
- 22) Wall Street Journal, July 25, 2009
- 23) Azeri Press Agency, July 23, 2009
- 24) The Messenger (Georgia), July 29, 2009
- 25) Interfax, August 3, 2009
- 26) Ibid
- 27) Azeri Press Agency, August 1, 2009
- 28) Reuters, July 10, 2009
- 29) Russia Today, July 9, 2009
- 30) Also see:
Canada: Battle Line In East-West Conflict Over The Arctic
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stopnato/message/39795>

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