

The Militarization of the Arctic. Canada's Role

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Armed in the Arctic

Arming Canadian Coast Guard icebreakers in the Arctic is one more way for Canada to assert its sovereignty without provoking conflict.

The federal government has agreed to study the recommendation to put guns on decks of icebreakers, as part of a response tabled last week to a Senate report, Controlling Canada's Arctic Waters: Role of the Canadian Coast Guard.

The U.S. Coast Guard, which has a part-military mandate and enforces military law in both domestic and international waters, is preparing for increased traffic in the far North, suggesting Canada needs to up its game. This year, Russia sailed across the ocean through the Bering Strait, and is planning another eight trips next year.

Light arms in remote waters would be neither unusual nor provocative, as gunfire can be used as a warning when foreign vessels drift unauthorized into Canadian waters. Australia began using deck-mounted machine guns in 2004 as part of its commitment to police its remote and hazardous sub-Antarctic waters.

The Canadian Coast Guard's role will inevitably change because a thawing Arctic will eventually introduce potential security threats, including illegal immigration, piracy, drug smuggling and terrorism. Sending a Canadian Forces armed vessel to deal with Arctic security breaches, costs too much in time and money, when a Coast Guard ship is already there.

Arming icebreakers is the most obvious way to protect Canadian security and exert Canadian sovereignty in an increasingly accessible, internationally contested region.

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