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Beyond "Use It or Lose It": Arctic Sovereignty, Security, and Canada's Northern Strategy Under Prime Minister Stephen Harper

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June 2024

Mulroney Papers in Public Policy and Governance No. 11

**MULRONEY PAPERS IN PUBLIC POLICY
AND GOVERNANCE**

No. 11

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Photo credit: Damon on Road

Prepared for the Brian Mulroney
Institute of Government

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Government
June 2024

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Among the many questions that shape this series are how leaders at various levels of government immersed in different policy files have reacted to the challenges, pressures, and opportunities that come with elected office. What lessons can we learn from what went right, and at times, what went horribly wrong? This series aims to identify and illuminate what students of public policy and administration need to consider in evaluating the success or failure of various policy decisions.

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INTRODUCTION

High resource prices coupled with scientific reports of receding sea ice and popular fears of emerging threats to Arctic sovereignty set the context for an aggressive political response during the early years of Stephen Harper’s government (2006–15). This approach centred on defending Canada’s sovereignty with new “military investments” to put “forces on the ground, ships in the sea, and proper surveillance” (Harper, 2005/2016b, p. 1). In a landmark 2007 speech in Esquimalt, British Columbia, the prime minister reiterated that “Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty in the Arctic; either we use it or we lose it.” The Speech from the Throne later that year highlighted the requirement to build the “capacity to defend Canada’s sovereignty,” an effort that lay at “the heart of the Government’s efforts to rebuild the Canadian Forces” (Speech from the Throne, 2007/2016, p. 35).

The common theme in these early pronouncements was a fear that rapid changes in the Arctic could have negative ramifications on Canada’s sovereignty and security in the region (for an early example of this thesis, see Huebert, 2003). Both expert and popular media commentaries stoked these anxieties (Landriault, 2020b), pointing to the potential for either interstate or unconventional conflict in the future Arctic or, at the very least, challenges to Canada’s longstanding legal position in the region—namely that the Northwest Passage constitutes Canada’s historic internal waters and not an international strait. In light of these seemingly valid concerns, and the uncertainty accompanying the region’s rapid environmental change, a more active military presence seemed both prudent and necessary.

While academic commentary since that time tends to fixate on statements made by the Harper government during its first few years in office, rhetorical constructs and perceptions of sovereignty and security risks facing the region changed over time. Despite disappearing ice, the acknowledgement of extensive northern natural resources, interest in potential Arctic shipping lanes, and uncertain seabed boundaries in the central Arctic Ocean, federal policy statements and military documents after 2008

began downplaying the danger of military confrontation over Arctic boundaries and resources (see Lackenbauer, 2011, 2021b). While the old conflict narrative was never completely banished from political rhetoric—and began to return after the Russian invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014—the policy trend from 2008 onwards was geared towards co-operation and a more sanguine appraisal of the international threat environment.

This subtle shift in policy discourse is commonly missed in the academic analysis of the Harper government's Arctic policy, which tends to focus on the early years of conflict-oriented statements rather than a deep analysis of the government's policy statements and actions from 2009–15 (see, for example, Charron, 2022, pp. 211–23; Dolata, 2015; Genest & Lasserre, 2015; Landriault, 2020a; Landriault & Minard, 2016; McCormack, 2020). To examine how the Harper government articulated its understanding of sovereignty and security in policy terms, we focus on two areas. First, given the high political salience attributed to the military's central role in “defending sovereignty” in speeches from 2005–8, we examine the evolution of official understandings of Arctic defence and security and, in turn, how the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) framed government messaging in strategic policy directives. While never directly repudiating the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), our evidence suggests that DND/CAF's propensity to downplay conventional military threats to the region and to situate its roles in a Whole of Government (WoG) context deliberately avoided “militarizing” Arctic sovereignty and applied broader Northern Strategy frameworks emphasizing the human dimensions of sovereignty as much as or more than the threats posed by hostile foreign states (for an expanded discussion of this theme, see Lackenbauer, 2021b).

Second, we examine the Harper government's understandings of Arctic sovereignty in the context of Canada's Arctic maritime position and extended continental shelf boundaries (for key background context, see Lasserre, 2010; McDorman, 2009; Riddell-Dixon, 2017), the two subjects most commonly raised by journalists and academic commentators as sovereignty challenges facing the country. What actions did the government take to bolster, exercise, or demonstrate sovereignty over these waters? Did these reflect a narrow, unilateralist approach to “defending” sovereignty, as some commentators allege (see, for example, Kraska, 2007, 2009, 2016; Plouffe, 2014; Steinberg, 2014; Zou & Huang, 2016), or did they also reflect an appreciation of (and adherence to) international law and multilateral governance?

Our research reveals that the Harper government retained a foot in both camps: an interest in conventional assertions of sovereignty and hard security and a willingness to act unilaterally when deemed necessary, as well as trumpeting a co-operative circumpolar regime defined by international law where soft security challenges arising from environmental change and increasing domestic and international activity posed the most acute short-term threats. While these two approaches were always present, there was a discernible change in emphasis beginning in 2008–9, when government policy and practice focused on co-operation and unconventional security.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Following the end of the Cold War, the official discourse in Canada on Arctic affairs shifted from continental defence and narrow sovereignty interests to emphasizing circumpolar co-operation and broad definitions of security that prioritized the human and environmental dimensions (for general background, see Coates et al., 2008; Griffiths et al., 2011; Huebert, 1998, 1999; Lackenbauer, 2020). Canada was an early and tireless champion of the Arctic Council, which was established at a meeting in Ottawa of ministers and representatives of the eight Arctic states in September 1996, and promoted the inclusion of Indigenous peoples' organizations as Permanent Participants (Axworthy & Dean, 2013; English, 2013; Lackenbauer & Dean, 2021). In 1997, a Canadian parliamentary committee recommended that the country should focus on international Arctic co-operation through multilateral governance to promote environmentally sustainable human development as "the long-term foundation for assuring circumpolar security, with priority being given to the well-being of Arctic peoples and to safeguarding northern habitants from intrusions which have impinged aggressively on them" (House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 1997, pp. ix, 100). The Liberal government under Jean Chrétien (1993–2003) embraced this emphasis on international co-operation, with *The Northern Dimension of Canada's Foreign Policy* (2000) affirming the predominance of environmental and social challenges. "Whereas the politics of the Cold War dictated that the Arctic region be treated as part of a broader strategy of exclusion and confrontation," the policy statement asserted, "now the politics of globalization and power diffusion highlight the importance of the circumpolar world as an area for inclusion and co-operation" (Dean et al., 2014, pp. 36, 38).

This new northern foreign policy had four overarching objectives: to enhance the security and prosperity of Canadians, especially Northerners and Indigenous peoples; to assert and ensure the preservation of Canada's sovereignty in the North; to establish the circumpolar region as a vibrant geopolitical entity integrated into a rules-based international system; and to promote the human security of Northerners and the sustainable development of the Arctic. By the start of the new millennium, developments in Indigenous self-government and devolution of federal powers to the territories required new economic opportunities that promoted northern interests. Similarly, asserting and ensuring the preservation of Canadian sovereignty was deemed compatible with multilateral cooperation. The focus on diplomacy and circumpolar cooperation meant that traditional preoccupations with "defending" sovereignty slipped to the back burner (for an overview of these trends, see Coates et al., 2008; Huebert, 1998). The seven main goals articulated in the integrated 2004 *Northern Strategy* (devised in concert with the premiers of the three Northern territories) also emphasized human and environmental security, with traditional sovereignty and defence priorities conspicuously absent (see Canadian Arctic Resources Committee, 2006, p. 2).

In the early 2000s, however, scientific evidence about the pace and impact of global warming in the Arctic led some Canadian academic commentators to push for a more proactive Arctic strategy that anticipated new sovereignty and security challenges (see Arctic Monitoring and Assessment

Programme, 2005, for the pivotal document driving this assessment). Former Canadian Forces Northern Area commander Colonel Pierre Leblanc (2000) and political scientist Rob Huebert (2001) warned that accelerating climate change portended new crises, anticipating renewed challenges to the legal status of the waters of the Northwest Passage for international transit shipping (see, for example, Canadian Forces Northern Area Headquarters, 2000; Huebert, 2001, 2003). According to their narrative, heightened international activity in the circumpolar Arctic would amplify the significance of boundary disputes (such as those in the Beaufort Sea and over Hans Island (for overviews, see Lackenbauer et al., 2020; Lackenbauer & Nielsen, 2022)), and a growing demand for Arctic resources would jeopardize international recognition of Canadian sovereignty. Other academics and journalists argued that to meet future sovereignty challenges successfully, a continued reliance on international law and friendly relationships with other Arctic states would no longer suffice (see, for example, Byers & Lalonde, 2005; Friesen, 2004; “Guarding the Arctic,” 2004; Huebert, 2001, 2003, 2004; McFarling, 2003).

Calls for a more robust Canadian military presence to bolster the country’s sovereignty stimulated debate within the academic community. For example, political scientist Franklyn Griffiths chastised “purveyors of polar peril” such as Huebert, Michael Byers, and Suzanne Lalonde for overreacting to alleged sovereignty and security challenges prompted by climate change (for early uses of this phrase in print, see Valpy, 2008; Windeyer, 2009). He countered the hype about an Arctic “rush” and called for a renewed human security focus and argued that Canadian Arctic policy should retain a human focus and emphasis on the success and well-being of Northerners (see Griffiths, 2003).

Griffiths’ message was swamped by the striking and alarming imagery offered by the “sovereignty on thinning ice” thesis (Huebert, 2001), coupled with the revelations of the Arctic Council’s Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, which published its reports in 2004 and 2005, and global fears of “peak oil” which made for simple popular media narratives that captured reader interest (Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, 2005). In this context, Prime Minister Paul Martin’s Liberals released the *International Policy Statement* in 2005, which identified the Arctic as a priority area in light of “increased security threats, a changed distribution of global power, challenges to existing international institutions, and transformation of the global economy.” It anticipated that the next two decades would bring major challenges requiring creative diplomacy as well as investment in new security capabilities to meet these challenges (see Dean et al., 2014, pp. 39–40). Although the Liberal government fell before it could implement its vision, it had intertwined sovereignty and security in political rhetoric and strategic documents in a way that had not been seen since the 1980s. It was left to the Conservatives, who came to office in January 2006, to further articulate and implement Canada’s Arctic sovereignty and security agenda.

“USE IT OR LOSE IT”: MILITANT SOVEREIGNTY AND SECURITY RHETORIC, 2005–8

The Canadian North was a key component of the Conservatives’ 2005 election platform, which played on the idea of an Arctic sovereignty “crisis” demanding decisive action. Stephen Harper promised that Canada would acquire the military capabilities needed to meet the sovereignty and security threats created by the opening of the Arctic and the potential challenges to Canadian sovereignty and resource rights. “The single most important duty of the federal government is to defend and protect our national sovereignty,” Harper (2005/2016b) asserted. “It’s time to act to defend Canadian sovereignty. A Conservative government will make the military investments needed to secure our borders. You don’t defend national sovereignty with flags, cheap election rhetoric, and advertising campaigns” (p. 1).

Along these lines, Harper’s Arctic agenda was highly political and partisan from the beginning. Within days of taking office in January 2006, the new prime minister rebuked US Ambassador David H. Wilkins for reiterating America’s long-standing rejection of the Northwest Passage as internal Canadian waters. “The United States defends its sovereignty,” Harper proclaimed. “The Canadian government will defend our sovereignty. ... It is the Canadian people we get our mandate from, not the ambassador of the United States” (“Harper Brushes Off U.S. Criticism,” 2006). This made for good political theatre, allowing Harper to show his nationalist resolve and distance his government from the Bush administration. It also anticipated a deliberate strategy “to cultivate a legacy as a champion of the North,” blending “opportunism and statecraft, shoring up both his party and Canadian unity.” As a former senior PMO insider told Steven Chase, the articulation of a strong Northern agenda helped to address the long-standing frustration amongst Conservative strategists “that the rival Liberal Party owned the flag. In most Western democracies, right-of-centre parties tend to own the patriotic vote, but in Canada ‘Liberals’ had effectively defined being pro-Canadian as being for the social-welfare state [and] for the CBC,’ with a dose of anti-Americanism thrown in” (Chase, 2014 cited in Lackenbauer, 2021b, p. 143).

Accordingly, Harper’s “Canada First” approach to the Arctic constituted “part of an effort to fashion a conservative nationalism, which also includes the celebration of soldiers as part of a Canadian martial tradition, rather than as peacekeepers, and the heavy promotion of the bicentennial of the War of 1812.” The Arctic offered a powerful source of “myths and narratives” conducive to nation-building, and Stephen Harper was “a big believer in the idea that nations are built by narratives – stories they tell themselves” (Chase, 2014).

The “sovereignty on thinning ice” storyline justified this muscular approach to “standing up for Canada,” and the Conservatives’ spate of electoral commitments to invest in military capabilities to defend Canada’s sovereignty reinforced the government’s emphasis on military or “hard security” in general. Framed as sovereignty initiatives that would help rebuild the capabilities of the Canadian Forces, Minister of National Defence Gordon O’Connor outlined these political commitments early in the Harper government’s first mandate. “I want to be able to have the Navy, Army, and Air Force operate

on a regular basis throughout the Arctic,” he proclaimed, pointing to the acquisition of Arctic-capable naval ships, more Canadian Rangers undertaking more patrols with better equipment, and “more aircraft up in the North so that the air force can operate more frequently in the North.” He promised an Arctic training centre for the Army so that southern-based soldiers would “be able to train in the Arctic.” To enable maritime operations, he promised at least one docking and refueling facility for the Navy. “We’re bringing on line satellites soon that will scan the Arctic on a regular basis,” he noted, and the government also intended to implement “some kind of sensor in the Northwest Passage channel” to keep track of foreign submarine incursions into Canadian waters (Vongdouangchanh, 2006).

The Conservatives entered office with a much stronger resolve to make the Arctic a top priority than their Liberal predecessors. The new prime minister emphasized this during his first northern tour in August 2006. “Canada’s new national government understands the first principle of Arctic sovereignty: use it or lose it,” Harper declared in August 2006, “and we have no intention of losing it” (Harper, 2006/2016a, p. 12). “Using” the Arctic would be accomplished by making campaign promises into a

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reality. Explicit “sovereignty” measures included expanding the Canadian Rangers, ordering new Arctic and Offshore Patrol (AOPS) ships, building a deep-water Arctic docking and refueling facility in Nanisivik on Baffin Island, launching the RadarSat-2 satellite to provide enhanced surveillance and data gathering capabilities, holding military exercises, building a Canadian Armed Forces Arctic Training Centre in Resolute, and establishing a new Reserve unit in Yellowknife. “We believe that Canadians are excited about the government asserting Canada’s control and sovereignty in the Arctic,” Harper told a *Toronto Sun* reporter in February 2007. “We believe that’s one of the big reasons why Canadians are excited and support our plan to

rebuild the Canadian Forces. I think it’s practically and symbolically hugely important, much more important than the dollars spent. And I’m hoping that years from now, Canada’s Arctic sovereignty, military and otherwise, will be, frankly, a major legacy of this government” (Harris, 2007).

When Stephen Harper or any of his ministers spoke of “defending sovereignty,” the reference was typically to the waters of the Canadian Arctic—and to the Northwest Passage in particular. Canada’s ownership of the Arctic lands was beyond contestation, and there was little perceived danger of foreign incursions on the islands. In a frequently cited quip, then Chief of the Defence Staff General Walter Natynczyk discounted the prospect of an Arctic invasion, saying that “if someone were to invade the Canadian Arctic, [the] first task would be to rescue them” (Regehr, 2017). The legal and jurisdictional status of the Northwest Passage, however, continued to generate uncertainty and apprehension in various Canadian circles. Given the United States’ history of insisting that an international strait ran through these waters, the Harper government’s sovereignty concerns focused on the possibility that foreign ships may take advantage of the melting ice to begin using the Northwest Passage without Canadian consent. The initial response was to approach this as a security threat.

International developments seemed to bolster the contention that the Arctic security environment was in a state of flux. In late 2005, the US attack submarine USS *Charlotte* surfaced at the North Pole, leading to speculation that it may have passed through Canadian waters (“Not Standing on Guard,” 2005; for a comprehensive review of Canadian political and media responses, see Landriault, 2020a, pp. 138–61). On the campaign trail, Harper highlighted this as an existential challenge to Canadian sovereignty. In speeches, he warned of “new and disturbing reports of American nuclear submarines passing th[r]ough Canadian waters without obtaining the permission of – or even notifying – the Canadian government” (Harper, 2005/2016b, p. 1). This fear of trespassing Americans led to new promises of under-ice listening systems that would “monitor our northern waters for submarines and other vessels” (Harper, 2005/2016b, p. 2; on armed icebreakers, see “New Canadian PM Rebuffs US Envoy,” 2006). Liberal opponents, meanwhile, were chastised for having “failed in their duty to rigorously enforce our sovereignty in the Arctic” (Harper, 2006/2016c, p. 10).

Following the Conservatives’ election in early 2006, work on that underwater sensor system began. Northern Watch was a technology demonstration project set up by Defence Research and Development Canada on Devon Island with an initial budget of \$9.75 million (DRDC, n.d.). It was intended to monitor four distinct types of traffic: declared shipping and cruise traffic through the Northwest Passage, undeclared maritime traffic, undeclared pleasure craft, and unannounced incursion by foreign military vessels. The intruding warship was chosen as the initial test scenario for the project because it represented the most “severe test of Canada’s ability to assert sovereignty in its northern territory” (MacLeod et al., 2009, p. 21). Facing significant environmental and technical hurdles, progress on Northern Watch was slow but the experiments continued for several years, with classified work in the field continuing to this day (see Carruthers, 2019).

Assuming a serious security threat to the region, analysts insisted that monitoring the Arctic without a real response capability was insufficient and irresponsible. The Harper government envisioned this enforcement coming in the form of heavy naval icebreakers, capable of carrying troops and interdicting foreign ships (Harper, 2005/2016b). Promised in a campaign speech in December 2005, the armed icebreaker program was initiated soon after its election victory in February 2006. With no serious input from the Canadian Navy concerning operational requirements, Prime Minister Harper and Minister of Defence Gordon O’Connor sought rapid results. A draft procurement study from early August 2006 assumed that the ships could be built on a “greatly compressed timeline,” through a combination of “fast tracking and crashing” a process thought possible because of the lack of complex weapons systems and associated command and control suites (“Concept of Employment,” 2006; “Option Letter for Arctic Patrol Ship,” 2006). That August, the Director General Maritime Force Development ordered a statement of operational requirements for the ships, and he wanted it as soon as possible (Lajeunesse, 2021, p. 3). While no design was ever finalized, the documents in circulation painted a picture of significant vessels with real firepower. A draft concept of employment assumed that they would be Polar Class 3 vessels, “equipped with large, medium and small calibre weapons so the CF [Canadian Forces] can meet its obligation to enforce the sovereignty of Canada.” This would “include a 57 mm gun as a minimum, and several mountings for machine guns, such as the .50 calibre

weapons” (Lajeunesse, 2021, p. 4). (For reference, a 57 mm gun is the same deck gun mounted on Canada’s frigates and can be used for point-defence, anti-air, and surface combat.)

While the armed icebreakers were being developed, the CAF’s northern operations expanded in both size and complexity. During the federal election campaign, Harper had accused then Prime Minister Paul Martin of talking “eloquently about defending national sovereignty” while he “allowed our sovereign capability to defend our territory to crumble” (Harper, 2005/2016b, p. 2). Looking to right that wrong, the Conservatives placed increased emphasis on the military’s annual exercises in the North. From 2005–8, the Harper government presented these exercises in a hard security light, as a means of “defending” Canada and protecting sovereignty over the lands and waters of the North (see Lackenbauer & Lajeunesse, 2016; Lajeunesse, 2017).

The military’s 2006 deployment, Operation *Lancaster*, was the largest in nearly three decades. The patrol ships *Goose Bay* and *Moncton*, as well as the frigate HMCS *Montreal*, were deployed alongside a platoon of soldiers from the Royal 22nd Regiment and a detachment of Canadian Rangers. The Royal Canadian Air Force provided air support while the Coast Guard contributed the icebreakers *Henry Larsen* and *Terry Fox*. Discussing the operation with the media, the prime minister highlighted his intentions to rebuild the military and “demonstrate our new Government’s commitment to asserting Canada’s sovereignty over our Arctic territory.” Harper insisted that this was a direct result of the “commitment I made ... when I promised to ensure that Canada’s jurisdiction over the islands, waterways and resources in the High Arctic is respected by all nations” (Harper, 2006/2016c, p. 9).

While various government departments were involved in Operation *Lancaster*, the prime minister focused on military security and Canada’s ability to “defend” its control over the Arctic lands and waterways from “other nations.” This assertion assumed the existence of a threat to Canada’s right to exercise that control and official statements from the following year reaffirmed this messaging. Prior to launching the government’s 2007 deployment to the North, Minister of National Defence Peter MacKay issued a press release stating that “there is nothing more fundamental than the protection of our nation’s security and sovereignty. Our Government knows that we have a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty over the Arctic. We either use it or lose it. That is why defending our Arctic sovereignty is a key strategic priority in our ‘Canada First Defence Strategy’” (“News Release: Minister of National Defence and Chief of the Defence Staff Travel to Arctic,” 2008/2016, p. 62).

Within two years of taking power, the Harper government had greatly expanded the size and scope of the CAF’s Arctic exercises. In 2007, it initiated the annual *Nanook* series which became the centrepiece of the military’s Arctic presence and showcased its capabilities (see Dodds, 2012; Lajeunesse, 2018). The operations became steadily more complex and involved more sophisticated equipment in the years ahead. In 2009, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) undertook anti-submarine warfare exercises involving the frigate HMCS *Toronto*, the patrol craft HMCS *Glace Bay*, and the submarine HMCS *Corner Brook* (“News Release: Canada Details Premier Annual Northern Sovereignty Operation,” 2009/2016). This was the first time that Canada had ever deployed a submarine to the Arctic and underlined the government’s intention to control the Northwest Passage, both above and below the ice.

The international context at the time was certainly conducive to the defence-driven Arctic mindset. In August 2007, the Russian federation set off a media frenzy when an expedition led by Artur Chilingarov planted a titanium flag on the Arctic seabed below the North Pole. “As part of the expedition aimed at claiming vast swaths of the Arctic Ocean seabed,” a *Globe and Mail* story reported, “the *Rossiya* atomic icebreaker burrowed a path to the Pole through a sheet of multiyear ice, clearing the way for the *Akademik Fedorov* research ship.” Although Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay dismissed it as “just a show” with no legal bearing, New Democratic Party Member of Parliament Dennis

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Bevington criticized the government for its lagging efforts “when it comes to asserting our legitimate claim to Arctic sovereignty” and suggested that the Russian mission “demonstrates a troubling reality for Northern communities and all Canadians concerning Arctic sovereignty” (Gandhi & Freeman, 2007). Later that month, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia had, for the first time since 1992, resumed “on a permanent basis” long-range flights by strategic bombers capable of striking targets inside the United States – a change quickly linked by the media to Russia’s claims to “a large chunk of the Arctic.”¹ That autumn, scientists announced they had recorded the Arctic sea ice at its lowest historic levels during the

2007 melt season. This recession was so great that the Northwest Passage was free of ice “for the first time in human memory,” with the US National Snow and Ice Data Center (2007) reporting that “a standard ocean-going vessel could have sailed smoothly through ... the normally ice-choked route.”

This context of uncertainty set off vigorous debate about what Canada needed to do to “defend” or assert its Arctic sovereignty. Experts such as Rob Huebert (2009) asserted that the Harper government was not going far or fast enough to ensure that Canada could monitor and control what was happening in its Arctic waters at a time of rapid change. In this narrative, Canada had fallen behind other states in building such capabilities and would have to work hard to catch up. Other critics, while welcoming the attention the Harper government was committing to the Arctic, questioned whether the new security capabilities being developed were the right ones. International legal scholars Michael Byers and Suzanne Lalonde (2009) highlighted the lack of search-and-rescue services across the region (pp. 1191–99), while others questioned the entire sovereignty-on-thinning-ice framework, suggesting that ideas about a sovereignty crisis deflected attention from substantive issues best dealt with through co-operation. Griffiths (2009), for example, advocated for a strategy based on the “elevation, engagement and invigoration” of international cooperation, seeking to engender a norm of “cooperative stewardship” rather than insecurity and military competition (p. 20).

¹ Putin explained that Russia had “stopped this practice in 1992. Unfortunately, not everybody followed suit. This creates a strategic risk for Russia ... we hope our partners show understanding towards the resumption of Russian air patrols” (Harding & MacAskill, 2007).

Domestically, the “use it or lose it” rhetoric frustrated and even offended some Northerners, particularly Indigenous peoples who had lived in the region since time immemorial (and thus resented any intimation that it was not sufficiently “used”). Some Inuit representatives, for example, suggested that the government agenda prioritized military investments at the expense of environmental protection and improved socio-economic conditions in the North. They insisted that “sovereignty begins at home” and that the primary challenges were domestic human security issues, requiring investments in infrastructure, education, and health care (see, for example, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2013; Kaludjak, 2007; Simon, 2008). Furthermore, the Inuit Circumpolar Council’s transnational *Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic* (2009) emphasized that “the inextricable linkages between issues of sovereignty and sovereign rights in the Arctic and Inuit self-determination and other rights require states to accept the presence and role of Inuit as partners in the conduct of international relations in the Arctic.”² Other commentators called for more balance between traditional military and human security approaches, with Lackenbauer (2008, 2009) arguing that the Harper government’s early Arctic policy statements overplayed the probability of military conflict in the region, while conducive to producing an image of strength and commitment to defend the country’s sovereignty, yielded a partial strategy that neglected diplomacy and development.

Behind the aggressive rhetoric of Harper’s early years in office, the government’s Arctic policy quietly evolved. While its commitment to enhancing the CAF role in defending northern sovereignty never waived, nor its emphasis on maintaining Canadian sovereignty, the government’s approach to the North became more nuanced. The 2007 Speech from the Throne suggested that the Harper government’s broader vision for the Arctic went beyond traditional sovereignty and security frames. Arguing that “the North needs new attention” and that “new opportunities are emerging across the Arctic,” the Conservatives promised to “bring forward an integrated northern strategy focused on strengthening Canada’s sovereignty, protecting our environmental heritage, promoting economic and social development, and improving and devolving governance, so that Northerners have greater control over their destinies.” This four-pillar strategy was expanded to “improve living conditions in the North for First Nations and Inuit through better housing,” with a new pledge to “build a world-class Arctic research station that will be on the cutting edge of Arctic issues, including environmental science and resource development” (“Speech from the Throne,” 2007/2016, p. 35). Northern leaders responded with mixed sentiments, applauding their inclusion in the Harper government’s expanded conceptualization of Arctic sovereignty while lamenting the lack of detail (Weber, 2007, pp. 50–51) or criticizing what they saw as an excessive emphasis on the military dimensions of sovereignty and foreign policy. Mary Simon (2007), then president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (the national Inuit political advocacy organization), asserted that the Northern Strategy should have a strong domestic focus aimed at improving the lives of Northerners, particularly Inuit whose “use and occupation of Arctic lands and waters by Inuit for thousands of years” constituted “the bedrock of Canada’s status as an Arctic nation” (see also Byers & Layton, 2007; Simon, 2009, p. 251).

² The declaration envisages the Inuit playing an active role in all deliberations on environmental security, sustainable development, militarization, shipping, and socio-economic development (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2009).

Statements by the Harper government after the 2007 Throne Speech slowly began to expand its discussions about strengthening Canada's Arctic sovereignty to include more explicit references to the Arctic states' shared adherence to international law. Marking the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in December 2007, Minister of Foreign Affairs Maxime Bernier commented that "the Convention plays an important role in Canada's Northern Strategy" by "building a stable, rules-based region under which we cooperate with other circumpolar countries on issues of common concern" ("News Release: Canada Commemorates 25th Anniversary," 2007/2016, p. 45). The Ilulissat Declaration (2008) by Canada and the four other Arctic coastal states reinforced the view that they would adhere to the UNCLOS framework as it applies to the Arctic Ocean, relying on the law of the sea to resolve any competing sovereignty claims peacefully. By January 2009, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lawrence Cannon, stated that although new US and European Arctic policy statements articulated some interests contrary to Canada's, these did not place Canadian sovereignty under acute threat.³ That March, Cannon acknowledged in a speech that geological research and international law (not military clout) would resolve continental shelf and other boundary disputes, and he emphasized the importance of "strong Canadian leadership in the Arctic ... to facilitate good international governance in the region" (Cannon, 2009/2016f, p. 85).

Canada's Northern Strategy: Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future was released in July 2009 and echoed these messages. This policy statement expanded on the four main pillars announced in 2007 and reinforced a message of partnership between the federal government and Northern Canadians, and between Canada and its circumpolar neighbours. Although it trumpeted the government's commitment to "putting more boots on the Arctic tundra, more ships in the icy water and a better eye-in-the-sky," it also explained that Canada's disagreements with its neighbours were "well-managed and pose no sovereignty or defence challenges for Canada."

This signaled a rather abrupt change of tone from previous political messaging (Government of Canada, 2009). Rather than a "use it or lose it" message, *Canada's Northern Strategy* stressed opportunities for co-operation in the circumpolar world, casting the United States as an "exceptionally valuable partner in the Arctic." It also emphasized opportunities for cooperation with Russia and "common interests" with European Arctic states, as well as a shared commitment to international law. This implicitly confirmed that bilateral and multilateral engagement was key to stability and security in the region. "We're not going down a road toward confrontation," Cannon stressed. "Indeed, we're going down a road toward co-operation and collaboration. That is the Canadian way. And that's the way my other colleagues around the table have chosen to go as well" ("Canada Unveils Arctic Strategy," 2009).

Statements by the Harper government after the 2007 Throne Speech slowly began to expand its discussions about strengthening Canada's Arctic sovereignty to include more explicit references to the Arctic states' shared adherence to international law.

³ Minister Cannon also responded that "Canada Already has its own Arctic Northern Strategy Defined in the 2007 Throne Speech" (Weber, 2009).

The Department of Foreign Affairs released its *Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* the following August. This document, intended to elaborate on the international dimensions of the Northern Strategy, reiterated the importance of the Arctic in Canada's national identity and Canada's role as an "Arctic power" while outlining a vision for the Arctic as "a stable, rules-based region with clearly defined boundaries, dynamic economic growth and trade, vibrant Northern communities, and healthy and productive ecosystems" (DFAIT, 2010, p. 2). The first and foremost pillar of Canada's foreign policy remained "the exercise of our sovereignty over the Far North," but the "hard security" message of the 2006–8 period was supplemented (if not supplanted) by an amplification in the tone of co-operation with circumpolar neighbours and Northerners. Reaffirming that Canada's Arctic sovereignty is long-standing, well-established, and based on historic title (rooted, in part, on the presence of Canadian Inuit and other Indigenous peoples in the region since time immemorial), the statement projected a stable, secure circumpolar world—but one in which Canada will continue to uphold its rights as a sovereign, coastal state.⁴

On the ground (or ice), the government's approach evolved in lockstep with its high-level policy statements. Language surrounding Operation *Nanook* '08 was less focused on threats to Canadian sovereignty and security and showed a clear movement towards a more nuanced understanding of unconventional safety and security challenges (see, for example, "News Release: Canadian Forces Lead Sovereignty Operation," 2008/2016). The following year, communications confirmed the emergence of a new narrative. Peter Van Loan, Minister of Public Safety, spoke of *Nanook* '09 having "allowed us to continue to build strong emergency management capacity in the North." In articulating the mission focus, he suggested that "exercises like *Nanook* provide a valuable opportunity for participants from all levels of government to train together so that we can respond to threats and natural disasters in a coordinated manner" ("News Release: Annual Arctic Sovereignty Operation," 2009/2016, p. 127). Defence Minister MacKay, who by virtue of his portfolio could be expected to place a harder security slant on the operation, congratulated the CAF on successfully achieving "their aim of demonstrating and improving upon their capabilities to respond to safety and security challenges in our Arctic" ("News Release: Canadian Forces High Arctic Operation," 2010/2016, p. 144). In separate speeches, he highlighted the CAF's ability to "provide humanitarian and disaster assistance" (MacKay, 2009/2016, p. 119) and respond to "emergencies in support of the territorial government" ("News Release: Canada Details Premier Annual Northern Sovereignty Operation," 2009/2016). By this point, the government's statements on *Nanook* indicated a change in focus from hard security concerns predicated on foreign encroachment (with the CAF as lead agency) to unconventional security situations where the CAF would lead from behind. The government's definition of "security" had expanded and shifted to focus less on foreign incursions and more on safety and constabulary tasks.

⁴ Leading Canadian academic experts seemed to reach a similar consensus around 2009, with the most strident proponents of the "sovereignty-on-thinning ice" school largely abandoning their earlier arguments that Canadian sovereignty will be a casualty of climate change and concomitant foreign challenges. Instead, academic narratives anticipating potential conflict have tended to emphasize how other international events (such as Russian aggression in the Ukraine in 2014) could "spill over" into the Arctic or how new non-Arctic state and non-state actors might challenge or undermine Canadian sovereignty and security (see, for example, Borgerson & Byers, 2016; Burney & Hampson, 2015; Byers, 2015; Huebert, 2014b; Sorensen, 2015). For a less alarmist view of Russia, see Lajeunesse & Lackenbauer, 2016.

Providing a tangible example of this shift, the government's most important investment in northern capability—its promised armed icebreakers—morphed from a defence to a security platform, lining up with the government's evolving conceptualization of security (for a comprehensive overview, see Lajeunesse, 2021). In late 2006, following conversations with the Navy, the government scrapped the idea of armed icebreakers and replaced it with commitments to build ice-capable patrol ships. In July 2007, the government formally announced plans for the AOPS, hailing the future vessels as “the most effective way to assert Canada's authority, independence and sovereignty” in its northern waters (Chase, 2014). Abandoning the heavy armament and troop-carrying ability, and reducing the icebreaking capability, the AOPS' contribution to Canadian sovereignty was to be more nuanced. They were intended to reinforce sovereignty by demonstrating comprehensive and effective Canadian control, including situational awareness, effective governance, and delivery of services, while generally improving access to the area. This was a more holistic “stewardship” (Griffiths, 2006) approach, and an important one in a security environment with few conventional military threats threatening the Canadian Arctic and where several civilian departments and agencies divided responsibility for exercising that sovereignty.

The new AOPS approach was framed by *Canada's Northern Strategy*, which had moved away from earlier concerns of sovereignty from something toward sovereignty exercised “through good governance and responsible stewardship” (DFAIT, 2010, p. 5). The AOPS contribute to that exercising of sovereignty by providing what the 2010 foreign policy statement called a “broad range of actions ... related to social and economic development, Arctic science and research, and environmental protection” (DFAIT, 2010, p. 5). Strategic and operational documents produced by DND echoed this idea that sovereignty is strengthened not by force per se, but by effective governance, control, and the consistent application of Canadian law (see, for instance, Canadian Army Land Warfare Centre, 2013, p. 65; Chief of Force Development, 2010, pp. 3, 7, 9, 26).

To put specific missions to this broad objective, the Navy's 2015 AOPS “Concept of Use” envisioned the ships performing the following tasks: search and rescue, support for other government departments (OGD), maritime domain awareness, assistance to law enforcement, aid to civil power, logistical support to the CAF and OGD, and sovereignty protection (RCN, 2015, p. 11). Nowhere was “defence against Russian incursions” to be found. The Navy's revamped maritime strategy, *Leadmark 2050: Canada in a New Maritime World*, likewise envisioned the AOPS helping to “regulate our Arctic home waters as well as to monitor and respond to events, with responsibilities ranging from assuring the safety of mariners and responding to environmental disasters to confronting incursions against Canada's sovereignty.” This effort includes “supporting the charting of still largely unknown Arctic waters for the safety of ocean shipping; contributing to ocean science, to improve Canada's understanding of fragile but changing Arctic ecosystems; supporting our federal partners to manage and protect Canada's Arctic resources; and supporting the Canadian Coast Guard's annual resupply of isolated coastal communities (RCN, 2016, p. 14). The *Canada First Defence Strategy* (2008), described the ships as an “effective platform for the coordination of whole-of-government operations,” while highlighted the Navy's role in “helping other government agencies such as the Coast Guard respond to any threats that may arise” (DND, 2008, pp. 8, 35). Similar messaging appeared in the 2010 *Statement*

on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy (DFAIT, 2010, p. 6; DND, 2008, pp. 3–4, 8, 14), the *Arctic Integrating Concept* (2010), the *Northern Employment Support Plan* (2012), and the *Army Arctic Concept* (2013) (Canadian Army Land Warfare Centre, 2013; Chief of Force Development, 2010; DND, 2012).

This is not to say that the AOPS' sovereignty role was abandoned. This task remains at the heart of its concept of operations. However, the government's understanding of sovereignty had clearly shifted to emphasize stewardship and control over the earlier preoccupation with hard defence challenges.

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

Translating this policy approach into practice went beyond building ships and expanding Canadian Forces exercises. The Harper government also sought to strengthen its control and demonstrate its sovereignty over the region through a series of legislative initiatives. These were not as dramatic as the Trudeau government's 1970 extension of Canadian environmental jurisdiction, or the Mulroney government's 1985 drawing of straight baselines. Rather, Harper's government moved incrementally to expand jurisdiction and signal intent, though not so dramatically as to provoke a needless political or legal battle with Washington (for earlier discussions on these themes, see Lackenbauer & Kikkert, 2010).

The first such initiative was to extend the *Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act* (AWPPA) from 100 to 200 nautical miles offshore Canadian land north of 60°N. Originally put in place in 1970 by the government of Pierre Trudeau as a preventative measure against pollution in the Northwest Passage, the AWPPA also represented a clever vehicle for asserting sovereignty over Arctic waters through functional legislation (Kirkey, 1996, p. 44). In 2009, the Harper government used the legislation in much the same way. While a renewed push by oil and gas companies to explore the Beaufort Sea had again raised the spectre of maritime pollution in the Arctic, there was no jurisdictional dispute or uncertainty over this activity (outside of a sliver of contested seabed between Alaska and Yukon). Nonetheless, the government announced an extension of the AWPPA from 100 to 200 nautical miles, selling the extension as a practical means of addressing the dangers of maritime pollution (Cannon, 2009/2016a; "News Release: Canada Moves to Further Protect Its Sovereignty," 2008/2016, p. 72). Prime Minister Harper explained that "we are acting today to protect our environment, improve the security of our waterways and ensure that all Northern residents – and, in particular, the Inuit – have a strong say in the future of our Arctic for generations to come" ("News Release: Prime Minister Harper Announces Government of Canada Will Extend Jurisdiction," 2008/2016, p. 67). This unilateral declaration was intended equally to demonstrate a degree of Canadian control over the Arctic waters and to show the government's willingness and ability to affect that control. Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq summarized that "the amended Act demonstrates our government's commitment to promoting economic development in Canada's North while protecting our country's environmental heritage and asserting our sovereignty" ("Press Release: The Government of Canada Takes Action," 2009/2016, p. 92). The Canadian media responded favourably to the move and made it clear to readers that this

environmental policy implicitly asserted sovereignty (see, for instance, Boswell, 2009, p. A7; Chase, 2008, p. A7; “New Law Also Bolsters Control of Arctic,” 2009, p. D12).⁵

Closely related to the AWPPA extension was the government’s June 2009 decision to make the Northern Canada Vessel Traffic Services (NORDREG) mandatory. Originally implemented in 1977 as a voluntary scheme, NORDREG was conceived to inform the Canadian Coast Guard of what ships enter Canadian waters north of 60°N. Prior to 2010, virtually all vessels operating in these waters complied with NORDREG as voluntary reporting secured them access to services including ice information, routing, and icebreaker assistance, while also facilitating potential search and rescue.⁶ Calls to make the system mandatory came from advocates suggesting that voluntary reporting was inconsistent with Canada’s full sovereignty over the Northwest Passage and its concomitant right to impose binding regulations (see, for example, Byers & Lalonde, 2009, pp. 1185–86; Griffiths, 2003, pp. 257, 272; Huebert, 2001, p. 92).⁷

In August 2008, the government announced that vessels of at least 300 tonnes would be obliged to report to Canadian authorities through NORDREG. In its public communication on the subject, the Harper government was clear that its objective in adjusting the requirements was safety and pollution prevention. “These regulations are not about preventing access,” Foreign Affairs minister Lawrence Cannon explained in November 2010. “They are about allowing access, while at the same time ensuring responsible management of a particularly vulnerable marine environment” (Cannon, 2010/2016e, pp. 194–97). As political scientist Heather Exner-Pirot pointed out, the shift was largely symbolic. The new rules applied only to ships over 300 tonnes, and such vessels were already required by international law to carry Automatic Identification Systems (which provide information on the ship’s identity, type, position, course, and speed). A mandatory NORDREG offered Canada little practical benefit not already provided under existing arrangements (Exner-Pirot, 2010). Nonetheless, the unilateral move prompted international objections. Private communications between Canada and the US on the matter remain classified. At the International Maritime Organization, however, the United States and the Baltic and International Maritime Council brought the issue to the attention of the Sub-Committee on Safety of Navigation, expressing concern that Canada’s actions might have been illegal and would probably have global ramifications (Kraska, 2015, 2016, p. 63).

Neither the NORDREG changes nor the AWPPA extension were likely necessary to achieve the safety and pollution prevention objectives for which they were sold politically. They did, however, provide what Exner-Pirot (2010) dubbed “bullet point[s]” that added to the list of assertive policies enacted to defend Canadian sovereignty. The Harper government’s reputation for “standing up for sovereignty” was buttressed by its unilateralism while the international community was put on notice of Canada’s intention to control its internal waters.

⁵ Internationally, the AWPPA expansion elicited criticism from the US and the European Union (Dolata, 2012, pp. 75–78).

⁶ Historically, 98 per cent of vessels voluntarily reported (Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, 2008, p. 32).

⁷ Other scholars cautioned that such a move would provoke international protests that could highlight the lack of acquiescence to Canada’s sovereignty position (see Lackenbauer, 2009, pp. 33–34).

DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT

The first few years of the Harper government also saw a gradual shift towards a more multilateral approach to Arctic foreign policy. This diplomacy was channeled primarily through the Arctic Council, which Minister Cannon (2010/2016b) extolled as “the central forum for international cooperation on Arctic issues” (p. 136). In the early 2010s, Canada joined the other Arctic states in working through the Arctic Council to develop joint initiatives such as the international treaty coordinating Arctic Search and Rescue, signed on 12 May 2011. “The signing of this agreement,” Minister of Health Leona Aglukkaq said, “is a pivotal event in the evolution of the Arctic Council. This legally binding agreement underscores the capacity of the Council to address emerging Arctic issues” (“News Release: Canada Concludes Successful Arctic Council Meeting,” 2011/2016, p. 201; see also Rottem, 2015; Spence, 2017).

This multilateral engagement was paired with closer bilateral links with other Arctic countries. For example, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Charles Strahl travelled to Russia in the summer of 2010 where the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding to co-operate on Northern Development and Indigenous issues. “Canada’s participation at these meetings is a tangible example of the true relationship that is being built between Canada and Russia,” Strahl noted. “Canada and Russia have a shared northern heritage that enables our countries to focus on the preservation of culture, language and traditional knowledge” (“News Release: Minister Strahl Visits Russia,” 2010/2016, p. 146). Minister Aglukkaq supported this notion, adding that “as a Northerner, I understand how important and effective collaboration and working together can be, to improve the lives of people in the Arctic” (“News Release: Minister Strahl Visits Russia,” 2010/2016, p. 146). That same year, co-operation with the other Arctic states also became an explicit government priority, with federal officials designating the United States as Canada’s “premier partner in the Arctic” (DFAIT, 2010, p. 23). No longer perceiving the US as a primary threat to Canadian sovereignty, the new language downgraded divergent views on the Northwest Passage and the Beaufort Sea boundary, suggesting that these disputes were “well managed, neither posing defence challenges for Canada nor diminishing Canada’s ability to collaborate and cooperate with its Arctic neighbours” (DFAIT, 2010, p. 7).

Canada’s tenure as chair of the Arctic Council from 2013 to 2015 served as the face of its Arctic foreign policy during these years. The political messaging employed in the lead up to the chairmanship reflected the government’s shift from questions of sovereignty and defence and towards development and human security. Minister Aglukkaq repeatedly reinforced the need to “strengthen our bilateral and multilateral cooperation” (“News Release: Minister Cannon Outlines Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy,” 2009/2016, p. 77), while publications by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) highlighted “the depth and complexity of the challenges facing the Arctic” and Canada’s recognition of “the importance of addressing these issues through the Arctic Council, other multilateral institutions and its bilateral partnerships” (“Backgrounder: *Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy*,” 2016, p. 79). The role as chair also provided a positive platform for the Harper government to promote a more holistic vision for the Arctic, reflected in the overarching theme of its chairmanship “Development for the People of the North” and its three sub-themes: responsible Arctic resource development, safe

Arctic shipping, and sustainable circumpolar communities. These priority areas, determined by a government-led public engagement process with northern Canadians, focused on enhancing the capacity of Indigenous Permanent Participants in the Arctic Council, creating conditions for dynamic and sustainable economic growth, and promoting vibrant communities and healthy ecosystems (Government of Canada, 2013).

Although Canada's chairmanship received a mixed assessment from scholars and other commentators (see Exner-Pirot, 2016; Government of Canada, 2015; Lackenbauer, 2017; Loukacheva, 2015), the Harper government's emphasis on multilateral approaches to promote and regulate safe shipping, preserve the northern environment, and enhance circumpolar Indigenous capacity suggests that simplistic depictions of Harper's Canada as a unilateral, militarizing actor in Arctic affairs overlook a broader picture of constructive circumpolar engagement on maritime safety, security, stewardship, and emergency response. While Canada's Arctic *modus operandi* from 2009 onwards became more international and multilateral, the Harper government never abandoned its core belief in the primacy of the state. The Ilulissat Declaration recognized as much and, in its backgrounder to Canada's *Statement on Arctic Foreign Policy*, DFAIT (2010) noted that "the key foundation for any collaboration will be acceptance of and respect for the perspectives and knowledge of Northerners and Arctic states' sovereignty. As well, there must be recognition that the Arctic states remain best placed to exercise leadership in the management of the region" (p. 23). Clarifying this position, Foreign Minister Cannon affirmed in 2010 that "in some cases, multilateral actions are necessary. But what those actions are, and when they are exercised, are largely for Arctic states to decide" (Cannon, 2010/2016d, p. 187).

CONCLUSION

Most academic discussions about Canada's approach to Arctic defence and security during the Harper era tend to fixate on the "use it or lose it" discourse circa 2006–8. This focus suggests a defensive, "sovereignty on thinning ice" mentality, building upon Stephen Harper's blunt (and therefore very quotable) early pronouncements and supported by annual photo-ops from Operation *Nanook*, generally set against a backdrop of warships, fighter aircraft, and soldiers surging North to "defend" sovereignty.⁸ By implication, most of the existing scholarship fails to acknowledge or appreciate the broadening of the Harper government's Northern Strategy over time as it moved beyond a narrow national defence agenda focused on securing borders and safeguarding resources to accommodate "soft" security and safety issues, as well as the value of multilateral and bilateral partnerships (see, for example, Huebert & Lackenbauer, 2021; Lackenbauer, 2011; Lackenbauer & Huebert, 2014; Lackenbauer & Lajeunesse, 2016).

Since 2008, most (although not all) Arctic policy experts, senior military officers, and scholars have sought to discredit pervasive myths about the centrality of "sovereignty threats" and a so-called

⁸ For the quintessential statement of this thesis, see Huebert, 2001. The main contours of this debate are encapsulated in Byers, 2009; Coates et al., 2008; and Griffiths et al., 2011.

militarization of the Arctic and race for resources (see, for example, Greaves & Lackenbauer, 2021; Lackenbauer, 2009; Lasserre et al., 2012). As the “sovereignty on thinning ice” pretext dissipated in the late 2000s, the Harper government could revert to a more conventional Canadian approach, similar to that of its Liberal predecessors (see Lackenbauer, 2020), that downplayed foreign state threats to sovereignty and security and instead prioritized sustainable development, safe shipping, and international collaboration to manage what it considered to be the most pressing security and safety issues facing Canada’s Arctic.

Despite academic and popular commentary suggesting that the Harper government never overcame its early, excessively militaristic approach to Arctic sovereignty and security, our research suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding. Its broadening and softening of Arctic defence and foreign policy is reflected in two areas where one would expect hard-line sovereignty, defence, and security

Positioned at the centre of the Harper government’s early push to defend the North, political statements held up the military as the guarantor of Canadian sovereignty and the first line of defence against anticipated security threats.

rhetoric to dominate: Arctic defence policy and measures to protect Canada’s Arctic waters. While the Harper government never explicitly repudiated or abandoned early rhetoric emphasizing Arctic unilateralism and a primary need to “defend” sovereignty and security, the actual practice of Canadian Arctic defence and foreign policy from 2006 to 2015 indicates that this aggressive approach did not serve as a robust pretext for strategic military planning or diplomatic practice. The early focus on sovereignty as something that must be “used” and “defended” was supplemented and eventually supplanted by an expanding focus on circumpolar cooperation, “soft” safety and security concerns, and sustainable development (for an elaboration on this theme, see Lackenbauer, 2021b). In short, the Harper government

gradually came to define sovereignty and security as complex, multifaceted concepts. As Foreign Affairs Minister Cannon pointed out in 2010, “sovereignty isn’t just about resolving boundary issues. Canada exercises its sovereignty daily through good governance and responsible stewardship, whether related to social and economic development, Arctic science and research, environmental protection, the operations of the Canadian Forces or the activities of our Coast Guard” (Cannon, 2010/2016c, p. 181).

Military activities and policy development demonstrate this transition in thinking. Positioned at the centre of the Harper government’s early push to defend the North, political statements held up the military as the guarantor of Canadian sovereignty and the first line of defence against anticipated security threats. Although publicly cast in a hard security role in political rhetoric, senior military strategists and planners recognized the limited conventional threats actually facing Canada. Accordingly, they devised policies and doctrine that emphasized more probable, unconventional ‘soft’ security and safety challenges in the North. Designing capabilities and doctrine to focus on supporting roles in WoG operations, as played out during annual Operation *Nanook* scenarios, the Harper government inspired investments in Arctic military capabilities that prioritized safety and security roles

rather than the conventional defence of “sovereignty” (territorial integrity) side of the mission spectrum (see also Lackenbauer, 2021b).

When speaking of the need to “defend” Canadian sovereignty, the Harper government typically meant against foreign threats to Canada’s Arctic waters rather than land. This was a natural position given ongoing disagreement with the United States about Canada’s position on the international legal status of the Northwest Passage as historic internal waters. The evolution of the Harper government’s perception of this threat and how it should be managed mirrored its transition from a unilateral, hard security focus to multilateral, whole of government soft security approaches. During his first term as prime minister, Harper’s idea of maritime security meant defence against intruding submarines and trespassing foreign vessels. By the end of the Harper era, talk of ships and submarines threatening Canadian sovereignty was replaced by pollution reduction, safe shipping, and disaster response. In 2005, American warships were potential intruders; in 2010, they were invited to participate in Operation *Nanook*, the government’s flagship “sovereignty operation.” In early 2006, the proposal for armed icebreakers was predicated on an alleged need to “defend” the Northwest Passage from foreign intrusions. When the contract for the AOPS was signed in 2012, these vessels (which replaced armed icebreakers) were tasked with “domestic surveillance, search and rescue, and supporting other government departments” (“News Release: Preliminary Contract Signed with Irving Shipbuilding,” 2012/2016, p. 231). By 2015, multilateral approaches to maritime safety and soft security had won the day over a “militarized” approach to “defending” the Northwest Passage—with important international agreements signed on search and rescue, oil spill response, and unregulated commercial fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean (Landriault et al., 2020).

The first Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014 signalled the transition from an era of so-called Arctic exceptionalism (see Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017; Lackenbauer & Dean, 2020), which assumed that the circumpolar region was and could be insulated from global affairs, to one of strategic competition. Although the “sovereignty on thinning ice” framework (suggesting that climate change, resources, shipping patterns, and boundary disputes might precipitate Arctic conflict) continued to echo in the popular media after this time, most expert commentators now emphasized the danger of international conflict outside of the Arctic spilling over into the region. The last year of the Harper government thus saw the resurgence of “new Cold War” narratives, predicated on escalating great power rivalry and potential impacts on Arctic peace and stability (see, for example, Byers, 2014; Huebert, 2014a, 2019; Lackenbauer, 2016b; Lajeunesse & Lackenbauer, 2016; “News Release: Baird Visits Norway,” 2014/2016). These narratives competed with the calm, considered, and co-operative framework that underlay Canadian Arctic foreign and defence policy from 2008 to 2009 to February 2022.

The substantive elements of Canada’s Arctic defence and foreign policies did not markedly change under the Liberal government under Justin Trudeau, elected in the fall of 2015. Through bilateral statements with US President Barack Obama, Prime Minister Trudeau initially reinforced a model for Arctic leadership that placed a clear priority on “soft security” and safety issues and abandoned the sovereignty-focused messaging of his predecessor. Similarly, the Liberal government’s work to produce

a new Arctic and Northern Policy Framework to replace the Northern Strategy indicated a renewed emphasis on environmental protection and Northern Indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, Canada's priorities continued to affirm the relevance and importance of a comprehensive approach to Arctic defence and security, with Canada's 2017 defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* balancing investments in defensive capabilities to deter would-be adversaries with the development of capabilities to support unconventional security and safety missions in the Arctic (on these themes, see Lackenbauer, 2016a, 2019; Lackenbauer & Kikkert, 2022; Lackenbauer & Sergunin, 2022). The "safety, security, and defence chapter" in the final Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, released in September 2019, reiterated the "commitment to a safe, secure, and well-defended Arctic and North, and as a continued expression of Canada's enduring sovereignty over our lands and waters" (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2019). The full extent of how Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has changed the Canadian Arctic defence and security environment remains to be seen (Lackenbauer & Dean, 2022), but evolving threats through, to, and in the region are likely to entail policies and investments across the defence, security, and safety spectrum (Lackenbauer, 2021a). In this respect, the evolution of the Harper government's Northern Strategy from a narrow "use it or lose it" mindset to a more comprehensive approach provided an enduring footing for Canada to protect and pursue its interests in an increasingly uncertain circumpolar world.

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