

Canadian Sovereignty: Climate Change and Politics in the Arctic

The Canadian Arctic Archipelago, as a defining landscape of the Canadian persona, quickly becomes a flash point when international politics are at issue. The effects of climate change on the archipelago are no exception to this rule. The Canadian Arctic as a whole is experiencing a warming trend as a result of climate change. The political interest of this trend lies in what Canada could lose if the ice of the archipelago disappears. Canada has met some opposition to its historical claim over the land, water, and ice of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, particularly over the Northwest Passage and mostly from the United States. The debate surrounding Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic is not new, but as a result of climate change and the consequent warming of the Canadian Arctic, it has gained new vigor. This debate typically centers on three primary components: melting Canadian Arctic ice, increased international shipping via the Northwest Passage as ice cover decreases, and the threat to Canadian sovereignty implied by increased international shipping.

A sense of alarm over melting Arctic ice tends to cloud the real issues affecting the archipelago, leaving society under the impression that sovereignty is indeed in danger. Warming does indeed imply the melting of ice (in general), but melting ice does not mean no ice, nor does it mean increased shipping. Often those who predict an ice-reduced or ice-free Northwest Passage tend to oversimplify the nature of the ice regimes in the archipelago, thus exaggerating the potential for increased shipping and the implied threat to Canadian sovereignty.

The fact that Canadian Arctic ice is melting is not in contention—it's the rate at which ice is melting and what melting ice means for the future of the Northwest Passage that ignite controversy. According to Huebert (2003), data from satellite imagery suggest that the rate of melt in the Canadian Arctic is greater than previously expected and is accelerating. These data, however, are not representative of the conditions present in the Northwest Passage, as they fail to account for the icebergs that meander southward from the Arctic Ocean into the lower reaches of the archipelago, where they block passages and create choke points. Despite the overall archipelagic warming trend, the Canadian Ice Service has not changed the definitions set in 1971 for the zone-date system, which organizes Arctic waters into sections based on a ship's ability to navigate during a specified period (Griffiths, 2004). This fact suggests that despite the Arctic warming trend, and despite the reduced ice cover throughout the archipelago's channels, conditions for navigation remain hazardous, and while different, they are not easier than the conditions existing in 1971. Otherwise, Transport Canada would update the Canadian Ice Service definitions to reflect improved navigation. In addition, ice melt patterns are not uniform throughout the archipelago, so prospective shippers face considerable uncertainty. For example, ice in the eastern Arctic is melting more slowly than in the western Arctic. And each winter, melting ceases until the following spring (roughly around June), so ice is always due to return.

The ice conditions notwithstanding, using the Northwest Passage promises to save international shipping companies an estimated 35% on a voyage between Europe and the Orient compared to taking the Panama Canal or trekking around Cape Horn. However, no sound business-minded shipping company, operating ships not strengthened for ice, would risk the potential losses associated with transiting the chaotic Northwest Passage in its present state (Griffiths, 2004). A rogue ship might indeed present an environmental threat, but a sovereignty challenge is not likely. Such a ship—not ice-strengthened, uninsured, and likely transporting illegal cargo—would naturally want to avoid detection and would therefore be in no position to challenge Canada over the legal status of the Northwest Passage.

That being said, if a state, the United States, for example, were willing to stand up for a rogue shipper and challenge Canada in the International Court of Justice, it would have to get Canada to acquiesce to the wording of the charge. Clearly, Canada would not agree to the charge, as that would undermine its position that the Northwest Passage

is sovereign internal waters! As the argument goes, the United States would be forced to support any ship wishing to enter the Northwest Passage without the permission of the Canadian authorities because not doing so would imply consent to Canadian sovereignty over the passage, which the United States does not recognize (Huebert, 2003). Given the importance of security in a post-9/11 environment, however, it's unlikely that the United States would want to agitate relations with Canada by challenging her sovereignty status in the Northwest Passage. Internal Canadian waters would indeed be a safer solution, in terms of United States security, than international strait waters.

Canada and the United States could further improve security and relations by extending the Arctic Cooperation Agreement, which currently pertains only to U.S. icebreakers, to include commercial and military vessels (Griffiths, 2004). This proposal may indeed become a reality when and if future conditions of the Northwest Passage allow for increased navigation, whether for east-west or north-south travel. Such an agreement would give Canada the de facto governing authority it desires and allow the United States freedom of navigation, without setting a precedent for other international archipelagos. The agreement could be worded so that it simply extends the existing agreement without prejudice to either state. Canada supports international shipping within the archipelago, as long as the Canadian government can set the regulations and standards, which it could continue to do under the agreement.

Canadian sovereignty over the waters of the Arctic Archipelago, and specifically the Northwest Passage, is not under threat as a result of increased international commercial shipping at this time, nor will it be in the near future. The erratic nature of archipelagic ice conditions, coupled with the imminent return of the polar winter, will dissuade any reputable shipping firm from using the Northwest Passage instead of the more reliable Panama Canal or Cape Horn routes. Given this lack of shipping potential, Canada need not fear an immediate sovereignty challenge over its archipelagic waters. Moreover, given the current security climate, it will not be in the interest of the United States, historically Canada's primary rival in the Arctic, to engage Canada in a sovereignty battle. Good Arctic relations with the United States are also important for Canada. Sovereignty, after all, is only as strong as the recognition expressed by other states.

REFERENCES

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