

Canadian Arctic Sovereignty:
Occupation, Exploitation, and Preservation of the Northwest Passage

Carlen MacFarlane
Canadian Politics (78:260)

Dr. David Docherty

April 19th, 2023

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Occupation	4
Exploitation	6
Preservation	8
Conclusion	9
Further Recommendations and Considerations	10
Bibliography	12

Introduction

The icy oceans in the once frozen northern regions of Canada are melting away, opening up wider straits and paths through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. The widening of the straits has prompted many foreign countries to question Canada's claim to sovereignty over these regions. Sovereignty, referring to the ultimate authority over a region, is a concept and position of power that requires widespread acceptance to hold any weight. Sovereignty relies on the acceptance of its claimed citizens as well as the acceptance of other sovereign territories to legitimize its claims. Sovereignty is largely demonstrated in three ways: occupation, exploitation, and preservation.

Canada's sovereignty, while largely undisputed, is often tenuous – especially in matters of the arctic and in particular, the opening of the 'Northwest Passage' due to climate change. The Northwest Passage is an increasingly vital shipping route connecting Europe to Asia through the waters of the Canadian Arctic that many large trading nations argue should be, and treat it like it already is, an international strait. Many countries point to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (McDonald 2010, 141) as proof that the Northwest Passage meets the qualifications to be considered international. The government of Canada disagrees with this. These conventions present an agreed-upon set of qualifications for a number of sea-related things; most relevant here is their definition of international waters.

International waters are bodies of water that serve larger international interests and cannot be restricted or controlled by a country in the same ways as internal waters. Internal waters, on the other hand, are bodies of water within a nation that the country has complete control or sovereignty over. Canada, however, maintains that the Northwest Passage is internal water, not international, citing the fact that to be considered an international strait by the United

Nations conventions, the path needs to be useful and frequently travelled to establish its status as international. Because of its history of being frozen over, the Northwest Passage has only started to rise in usage since around 2000, usually by icebreakers, ice-strengthened ships, and yachts. As temperatures in the Arctic rise, there is a reduced need for special equipment and preparations such as reinforced hulls, seasonal travel, and coast guard ice breaker escorts. While creating more opportunities for cheaper and faster shipping and tourism in the north, increased water traffic comes with a trade-off in balancing these economic incentives with environmental responsibility that also impacts the economy and introduces challenges to the preservation of Canada's claims to sovereignty over the Arctic.

Occupation

Canada's sovereignty is generally accepted in the north, though not without being regularly tested. Statistics Canada (2023) indicates that while the sparsely inhabited territories of Canada make up almost 39% of Canada's land mass, its population only makes up about 0.32% of the nation's population. Because of the rurality of many towns and communities in the territories, prices of goods are far higher than in most other cities and towns in Canada. This has led many northern communities to rely on fishing and hunting as a more sustainable and cheaper alternative.

While many northern communities likely do not want to rely on tourism for their economy, it is where a large percentage of many communities' income comes from. Tourism in the north heavily relies on its environment, as scenic snowy landscapes are the main attraction for many about Arctic travel. As global temperatures rise, especially in the Arctic, other places like Lapland, Finland, have had such warm winters that there has been no snow, meaning far fewer tourists (Wendover 2019, 9:38). Just as much as climate change is responsible for opening

up the Northwest Passage and making Arctic tourism more accessible, more usage of the passage brings worry of more pollution, poorer air quality from ship exhaust (Wendover 2019, 6:58), and underwater noise pollution, driving away wildlife (Lothead 2023).

To increase its presence in the north, the Canadian government announced the hiring of 500 rangers in 2007 to join the over 1600 rangers dispersed throughout the territories (Lajeunesse 2008, 1041; McDonald 2010, 139). Doing this increased the government's visual presence as well as its legal enforcement presence in the region, further solidifying its sovereign claim to the lands. This extends further to the Northwest Passage, though without the real humans. In 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that the government would invest in unmanned aerial and underwater surveillance technologies to monitor the country's Arctic airspace and undersea against any invasions (Lajeunesse 2008, 1043; McDonald 2010, 143). In addition to more human presence in the north, Canada has also invested in developing military bases and water ports in some northern communities like Alert, Pond Inlet, and Resolute Bay (Lajeunesse 2008, 1041; McDonald 2010, 138).

Canada's Arctic is no stranger to invasion. In 2007, a Russian submarine placed a Russian flag on the seabed in Canadian territory (Taylor 2022, 480; McDonald 2010, 137-138). Since 1973, Denmark and Canada have had peaceful disputes over Hans Island, a small island in the Arctic, which were eventually settled in 2022 with the border of the two countries dividing the island roughly 60/40 respectively (RealLifeLore 2022). In 1985, the US Coast Guard sent an Icebreaker ship through the Northwest Passage without prior permission by the Canadian Government because of its assertion that the Northwest Passage should be, and is, international waters (Wendover 2017, 6:08). This led to an eventual treaty between the two countries, aptly named the Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United

States of America on Arctic Cooperation (1988), to settle on free movement by American ships through the Arctic with Canadian permission (Lajeunesse 2008, 1044). Taylor (2022) highlights the long history of aerial intrusions of Canada in the Arctic dating back to the 1920s.

Nevertheless, Canadian sovereignty has remained through all these challenges, though in order to prevent future challenges, the country will need to strengthen its claim to this sovereignty over the Arctic by creating an international image of the land and waters as its own.

Exploitation

While the territories of Canada are largely uninhabited and empty, the Arctic region is full of opportunity for development to further solidify Canada's sovereignty in the region. Ranging from a rich concentration of natural resources like oil and coal, to the faster and cheaper shipping routes of the Northwest Passage, the opportunities for development are costly but with large economic potential. Ironically, climate change has opened up a shipping route that is better for the environment because of its faster and shorter route. Neither of these developments would be accessible without the warming of the Arctic, melting much of the ice that previously stood in the way. By developing more seaports along the Northwest Passage, there would be more accessibility for rural mines and resource extraction points to export their resources as well as bring in more goods imports at potentially cheaper costs. A more developed route through the Arctic would also create a safer passage for shipping vessels with more places to stop and refuel or get to in the case of emergencies.

This resource exploitation of the Arctic is a double-edged sword because, while it is true that without warming, none of it would be possible, the more the Arctic is exploited, the more the temperatures will rise and cause more problems. Because of the high costs of all the extra equipment needed for drilling in ice and ocean, it has been economically inefficient to drill for

oil in the Arctic (Wendover 2019, 7:42). As temperatures warm, however, costs to drill for natural resources will plummet, though also at the cost of increasing wave sizes from climate change which will require larger and stronger equipment.

According to the Scott Polar Research Institute from Cambridge University (2022), as of 2022, the Northwest Passage had only been successfully travelled in its entirety 351 times since 1903, 283 of which have been since 2000. Largely, this trip has been done by yachts, sailboats, and motorboats, with only 28 of the 351 successful journeys being done by cargo ships. Because of the infrequent usage of the passage, the Canadian government has maintained that the passage has not met the usefulness metric in determining international straits, and therefore maintains its sovereignty and control over the region. Though as the Northwest Passage's popularity grows, the government will be forced to make some decisions on how it will handle its usage and monitoring. If the government chooses to capitalize on the Northwest Passage and open it up for more development as a shipping route, there will need to be better security, more frequently distributed rescue stations, more developed water ports and refuelling locations, as well as a decision to make about what kind of passage it will be. These kinds of developments would give the region a stronger visible connection to the country, reinforcing international acknowledgement of Canada's Arctic sovereignty.

There are two main options for types of shipping routes that the passage could become. Succumbing to the international pressure of other countries to recognize the Northwest Passage as an international waterway, the Canadian government would largely forfeit its sovereignty and control over the area, and likely lose some weight to its claim to the Arctic north. This outcome would bring the Northwest Passage together with international straits like the Danish Straits, Turkish Straits, and the Danube River, leaving the country with a larger responsibility and less

financial benefit (Wendover 2017, 5:02. Alternatively, Canada could follow the path of controlled routes like the Panama Canal and the Suez Canal, allowing the country to profit from the passage's use and be more particular with whom passage through is granted (Wendover 2017, 7:36). Both of these options would require much further development of the Canadian Arctic along the Northwest Passage which would also solidify Canada's sovereignty in the region with a larger presence to be recognizably Canadian territory.

Preservation

While sovereignty over such a vast area of natural habitat comes with opportunities for exploitation, it also comes with obligations that extend beyond Canada's own national interests. For example, Brazil has the Amazon Rainforest, a major supplier of global oxygen and an essential carbon trap that helps to mitigate climate change. There is a global expectation on Brazil to properly manage and look after the Amazon, recognizing its importance in maintaining a stable global climate. Similarly, Canada's pristine Arctic provides national economic opportunities, but there are larger international interests in preserving the biome. The melting ice caps in the Arctic will cause rising sea levels that would submerge many entire small island nations and many areas of larger countries (Wendover 2017, 1:07). The Arctic is also responsible for reflecting the sunlight and keeping the planet cool, but as the snow and ice melts, more heat will be absorbed by the planet, causing far greater damage (Lynch 2014).

There are many concerns on the local level of pollution from ship discharge, poorer air quality from ship exhaust (Wendover 2019, 6:58), and underwater noise pollution (Lohead 2023). These would negatively impact hunting, gathering, and everyday ways of life for many of these rural northern communities. Already afflicted with exorbitant prices on goods, these isolated communities have unique and longstanding cultures that are threatened by increasing

levels of influence from tourism and travel. The other side of the occupation and exploitation discussed in previous sections of this paper is the preservation of the beautiful landscapes and cultures indigenous to the Arctic. As climate change warms the arctic, the ways of life of the over 4 million people who call the Arctic Circle home internationally drastically changes (Wendover 2019, 10:14). The environment around them is disappearing, building in the once solid and frozen landscapes of the north is becoming increasingly difficult (Wendover 2019, 9:22), and the wildlife that many live off of is being driven away.

As custodians of the Arctic, Canada has a large responsibility to look after the environment and its northern regions, not just for its own well-being, but in the interest of the global climate, which affects every human being and organism on the planet. Communities with economies structured around tourism can only function as long as there is attraction and interest to bring tourists, and with the main pulls of the Arctic diminishing over time, desperate times call for desperate measures. With a region of such opportunities, a balance needs to be found to maintain and preserve the Arctic. The risks of allowing exploitation of resources and rampant travel through the region would have extreme consequences worldwide, not just to Canadian sovereignty in the north.

Conclusion

With global temperatures rising, the northern Arctic region of the world is becoming less stable while simultaneously opening up opportunities for further development and utilization of increased accessibility for tourism, goods transportation, and resource exploitation. The melting of the icy waters means the long-sought-after Northwest Passage is becoming more easily traversed by a wider range of vessels. This passage, though assisted by climate change, could create a shipping route that cuts down on fuel usage and distance travelled between Europe and

Asia, allowing for cheaper goods and a less environmentally taxing by-product. While countries disagree on the ownership status of the Northwest Passage, Canada maintains that it is internal waters, and the Canadian government should have a say over its development and usage. To continue its claims to sovereignty, Canada will need to develop the region in some kind of way to ensure its territory is known. Many challenges come with whatever Canada decides to do with the passage, and one can only hope it does not have any adverse side effects on the environment, climate, sovereignty, economy, and communities involved.

Further Recommendations and Considerations

As Canada looks for strategies and approaches to maintaining sovereignty in the north, the following suggestions and choices should be strongly considered. Some possibilities could include a higher military or ranger presence to protect the lands and communities from foreign invasion and environmental exploitation, though this comes at the expense of some autonomy that the north desires. Turning the Northwest Passage into a controlled shipping route would mean that Canada has a say over what vessels can pass through, though this would mean costly development and traffic that would disturb local communities and wildlife. Making the Northwest Passage an open, international waterway would benefit the environment as a whole, allowing for shorter and cheaper travel for shipping goods, but also bring even more traffic to these areas. To avoid extra spending and development, Canada could look at hiring or contracting help from other nations or corporations, though this would forfeit a great deal of Canada's northern sovereignty. No matter what outcome is reached, there are a number of things that need to be addressed. Safety is essential. If the waterways get opened up, Canada has the responsibility of ensuring safe travel of vessels through the Northwest Passage and having emergency responders available, which currently are not. National security needs to be ensured.

Canadian sovereignty will continue to be challenged unless something is done to secure its borders and protect against unwanted foreign intruders. The environment needs to be protected. The Arctic is a fragile ecosystem that has a devastating impact on the rest of the globe if not looked after, and therefore needs to be preserved as much as possible. Local cultures and communities need to be respected and preserved. With most northern communities largely consisting of Indigenous groups, these cultures have already been destroyed by Canadian colonialism and imperialism enough and what little bit that is left needs to be cared for and protected. No solution seems to be perfect, but at this rate, as the Arctic's projected future is getting shorter and shorter, something needs to be done, and a balance needs to be found.

Bibliography

- “Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America on Arctic Cooperation.” January 11, 1988.
<https://www.treaty-accord.gc.ca/text-texte.aspx?id=101701>
- Headland, R. K. 2022. *Transits of the Northwest Passage to the End of the 2022 Navigation Season*. Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge University.
<https://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/resources/infosheets/northwestpassage.pdf>
- Lajeunesse, Adam. 2008. “The Northwest Passage in Canadian Policy.” *International Journal* 63 (4): 1037-1052.
- Lochead, David. “ICC wants tougher rules on Arctic underwater shipping noise.” *Nunatsiaq News*. February 3, 2023.
<https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/icc-wants-tougher-rules-on-arctic-underwater-shipping-noise/> (accessed April 2, 2023).
- Loukacheva, Natalia. 2009. “Nunavut and Canadian Arctic Sovereignty.” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43 (2): 82–108.
- Lynch, Patrick, & Mike Finneran. “NASA Satellites Measure Increase of Sun’s Energy Absorbed in the Arctic.” *NASA*. December 17, 2014.
<https://www.nasa.gov/press/goddard/2014/december/nasa-satellites-measure-increase-of-sun-s-energy-absorbed-in-the-arctic>.
- McDonald, James. 2010. “Exercising Agency in an International Socioscientific Controversy: The Use of Human and Material Agents to Assert Canada’s Sovereignty in the Arctic.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 35 (1): 129–147.
- RealLifeLore. “How Canada Just Got a Land-Border with Denmark.” July 14, 2022.
<https://nebula.tv/videos/reallifelore-how-canada-just-got-a-landborder-with-denmark>
- Statistics Canada. 2023. <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/search>
- Taylor, Lawrence. 2022. “Foreign Overflights in the Canadian Arctic and the Defense of National Sovereignty in the Region, 1923-1937.” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 52 (4): 465–483.
- Wendover Productions. “Canada’s New Shipping Shortcut.” April 25, 2017.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcDwtO4RWmo&ab_channel=WendoverProductions
- Wendover Productions. “The New Economy of the Warming Arctic.” January 8, 2019.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msjuRoZ0Vu8&ab_channel=WendoverProductions