SOVEREIGNTY AND SECURITY IN THE CANADIAN NORTH: (RE)LEARNING THE LESSONS

P. WHITNEY LACKENBAUER, Ph.D., is associate professor and chair of the department of history at St. Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo, Ontario. A frequent commentator and author on Northern issues, his most recent books include The Canadian Rangers: A Living History (UBC Press, 2013) and Canada and the Changing Arctic: Sovereignty, Security and Stewardship (co-authored, WLU Press, 2011). His co-authored book Arctic Front: Defending Canada in the Far North won the 2009 Donner Prize for the best Canadian book on public policy.

ABSTRACT

Understanding the history of the Canadian North is key to comprehending our peculiar mindset about Arctic issues – particularly when it comes to sovereignty. History can give us confidence, allowing us to break away from a narrow fixation on sovereignty loss, as well as yielding valuable lessons about the unintended consequences of sovereignty and security practices conceived in southern political centres and deployed in the North without sufficient regard for local impacts.

"Canada's Arctic is central to our national identity as a northern nation. It is part of our history. And it represents the tremendous potential of our future." Prime Minister Stephen Harper's words, proclaimed in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, in 2007, connected the past, present, and future. Canada boasts the world's longest coastline, and most of it is in the Arctic. It has extensive jurisdiction and sovereign rights in the region, which it sees as a resource frontier, a homeland for its northern peoples, and a source of national identity.

Over the last decade, the changing Arctic has become front page news in Canada and around the world. Uncertainty over climate change, international interest in Arctic resources, undefined continental shelf boundaries, potentially viable maritime transportation routes (particularly the Northwest Passage which Canada considers its internal waters, not an international strait), and perceived sovereignty and security threats make Canadians keen observers of geopolitical dynamics related to the Arctic and what these mean for their foreign, defence, and domestic policies.

At the highest political levels, the Canadian government has intertwined sovereignty and security issues with strong rhetoric asserting Canada's status as an "Arctic superpower." On the other hand, a more optimistic message emerges in Canada's

official *Northern Strategy* and its statement on Canadian Arctic foreign policy, which express clear confidence in Canada's sovereignty position and place a high priority on improving the social and economic well-being of northern residents, protecting the environment, and improving Arctic governance – regionally and internationally. This dual messaging emphasizing sovereignty, security, and national interests, as well as international cooperation and stewardship, reveals Canada's complex perspective and position on Arctic issues.

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Scholars have gone to great lengths to emphasize vulnerabilities in or uncertainties about our sovereignty claims in the Arctic over time – not Canada's remarkable achievement of consolidating its Arctic sovereignty position since 1880 through diplomacy and state action.

The Alaska Boundary dispute serves as a prime example of American bullying and expansionist tendencies, Britain's acquiescence, and our fledgling dominion's need to take control over its own destiny – because no one else would uphold our interests. Did Canada have the stronger case? Probably not, but such considerations do not matter much in nationalist myth-making.

Historians often cite the Second World War and early Cold War as examples of how American security imperatives forced Canada to take strategic notice of its Northwest and then the High Arctic, threatening Canadian sovereignty and control. But the Alaska Highway bolstered rather than eroded Canada's position in the end, and bilateral agreements to build and operate the Joint Arctic Weather Stations on remote Arctic islands in the late 1940s and the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line from 1955-57 similarly confirmed Canadian sovereignty. Neither Canada nor the United States compromised core principles, but acted as respectful neighbours and allies with shared interests in continental defence.

Since the 1960s, when sovereignty and security discussions shifted to Arctic waters, differing Canadian and American positions on the legal status of the channels through Canada's Arctic Archipelago have proven more vexing. The transits of the oil tanker S.S. *Manhattan* in 1969 and the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Polar Sea* in 1985 affirmed that the United States considers the Northwest Passage an international strait, open to navigation like other strategic straits around the world. Canada insists that these are internal waters, subject to full Canadian sovereignty and control. Bridging this legal chasm has proven impossible, but the two countries have managed it in constructive ways – such as the 1988 Arctic Cooperation Agreement, brokering a practical compromise on U.S. icebreaker transits while "agreeing to disagree" on the legal status.

How we understand history shapes how we perceive the Canada-U.S. relationship in the Arctic, and expectations about Canada's place in the circumpolar world more generally. Political scientist Rob Huebert contends that we are entering a new era of the Arctic where climate change, newly accessible resources, and burgeoning global interest place Canada in a precarious sovereignty and security environment. At best, he asserts, history reveals Canada's limited capacity to protect its sovereignty and security in the region and explains why other nations have advanced Arctic claims at the expense of Canada's.

An emphasis on historical cooperation, however, suggests that Canada has benefited from a longstanding, responsible strategy that affords us as strong a sovereignty position as international law allows and also maintains constructive relations with our Arctic neighbours. Intermittent sovereignty and security "crises," however, have failed to provide the political and popular interest required to support a sustained, strategic investment in the region. History can give us confidence, allowing us to break away from a narrow fixation sovereignty loss, as well as yielding valuable lessons about the unintended consequences of sovereignty and security practices conceived in southern political centres and deployed in the North without sufficient regard for local impacts.

While commentators such as Rob Huebert suggest that there is a "perfect storm" brewing today that will fundamentally destabilize Northern life, this is not a new scenario. Inuit and other Northern peoples felt the disruptive impacts of defence footprints on and in their homelands after the Second World War. The DEW Line stations were beachheads of modernism: sites of wage employment, new housing, access to social services, and Western technology and material culture. Although not primarily designed to bring Aboriginal peoples under state control, defence initiatives had far reaching effects. Inuit

political leader Mary Simon has summarized that "too often, military projects are centralized undertakings that are unilaterally imposed on indigenous peoples and their territories." Stated as such, the so-called "militarization" of the Arctic appears to fit within the framework of a coercive state interested in re-engineering Northern life to conform with modern (and military) priorities.

In other cases, however, the military learned how to engage in meaningful dialogue and value Northern perspectives to support sovereignty and security. The Canadian Rangers, a unique military organization established in 1947, are a case in point. Rather than committing full-time soldiers to defend remote northern and coastal regions against an unlikely invasion, the military recognized the value of having volunteers who already lived in isolated communities serve as its "eyes and ears." Over time, the military, the Rangers, and their host communities developed strong relationships rooted in respect and mutual learning. As a bridge between cultures and between the civilian and military realms, the Rangers grew to embody the successful integration of national security and sovereignty agendas with community-based activities and local stewardship. Today, this practical partnership, rooted in traditional knowledge and skills, serves as an important example of cooperation, communal and individual empowerment, and cross-cultural understanding.

Placing Northerners at the centre of the national conversation about sovereignty, security, and stewardship requires moving beyond political statements, media coverage, and "expert" academic opinion gleaned from archives and public documents. It means embracing various lenses to understand the historical and contemporary North, and requires commitment to an ongoing dialogue.

My travels throughout Canada's North over the last decade have taught me to ask new questions and to think in new ways. For example, in August 2010, when I was embedded with a Canadian military unit on Operation Nanook. On the first night, after we established camp on Bylot Island, Ranger Pauloosie Atagootak invited me for a walk. As we trudged over the tundra and down lush valleys, I asked him questions about the land, and he told me stories and shared his thoughts on living in the North.

After walking for about half an hour, Paul sat down on one of the downward slopes. After a couple of minutes of silence, he said the simple words: "I'm home." I felt it: the connection to the land, his homeland, his identity. He had spent much of his childhood in camps along this stretch of coastline. The land was as familiar to him as it was exotic and remote to me.

As we sat on the soft ground, we talked about community life. He worried about the younger generation who spent all their time plugged into iPods and playing video games. Paul pointed out that the clouds told of the weather coming in. How many children in Nunavut still looked to the skies each night, as his grandfather had taught him to do? Would climate change alter weather patterns so much that it would render such traditional knowledge moot? If resource development did spark a modern-day gold rush in Nunavut, how would the next generation of Nunavummiut fare? I dared not speculate. Nevertheless, Paul provided a reassuring message. Inuit had faced challenges in the past, and they had proven resilient.

A "crisis" mentality conditions us to react hastily rather than to listen, discern, and act prudently. The idea of change at an "unprecedented pace" suggests that the past can no longer offer guidance. But it can, and it should. Canadian officials have had lots of experience managing sovereignty and security agendas in light of major geopolitical change since the Second World War. Balancing these considerations with domestic imperatives to improve the quality of life of Northerners, and translating our Northern strategy into deliverables that reinforce a constructive and secure circumpolar world, are real challenges facing Canada in the twenty-first century Arctic.