Symbolism and Militarism of Canada's North

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This paper examines why the Government of Canada is presenting the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) as one of, if not the, primary "protector" of Canada's North – despite the fact that it is mandated to play a supporting role to other government agencies in the region. As part of this paper, the relationship dynamics between the Canadian public and the North are also examined as the region is seen and presented as integral to the Canadian identity (Canada, 2009, p. 1). The CAF is also examined as it has emerged as a widely trusted and respected national institution with widespread support among the populace. Despite the supporting role of the CAF in the conduct of government operations in the North, the CAF emerges as a prominent – and popular – symbol through which to present a narrative of protection, "safeguarding" the North in the face public concern.

The first section of this paper examines the evolution of Canada's identification with the North over time and how it has come to assume an increasingly important status in the Canadian identity. It then examines the domestic political context within which Canada's relationship with the North has developed, including public concern regarding the security of the region and the political value of a unifying national symbol. Next, the paper examines the security concerns that are often cited as justification for increased security measures in the North in order to assess the need for an increased military presence. This analysis leads into the case study for this paper, which focuses upon the role and responsibilities of the CAF in the North. Finally, we conclude with an analysis of the broader implications for the Government of Canada's overall approach to activities in the North.

Canada's Relationship with the North

Canada is often characterized as a mosaic for world cultures (Raney, 2009, p. 21) while contending with the difficulty of defining characteristics that speak to the essence of Canadian identity. However, the North remains a subject that transcends many issues of internal identity politics in Canada. The Canadian public's fascination with the North is in part explained through the history of the region. Many of the sailors participating in early expeditions to the North kept detailed journals in order to document not only the terrain they encountered but the hardships they faced, and the creatures they discovered. During the 19th century, the increasing circulation of print media allowed the general public greater access to these accounts – which quickly captured public attention and imagination (Saint-Pierre, 2009, p. 157). Not only were these were among the only first-hand accounts of the region available at the time, they were produced during "the age of romanticism," a time when Victorian society developed a pronounced interest in humanity's relationship with the natural environment (Grant, 1989, p. 21). This was combined with the allure of national honour and prestige that came with conquering such an inhospitable territory (Grant, 2010, p. 95). These expeditions, and the journals, stories and paintings that resulted served to inspire a romanticized perception of the North, particularly during the British Royal Navy's search for the Northwest Passage (Grant, 1989, p. 23-4).

After the British conquest of New France in 1760, Canadian politics was largely influenced by the underlying fear that then-British North America was at risk from the United States and its internal conflicting forces. This sense of vulnerability bred the desire to strengthen the position of the British North American colonies while avoiding the violent internal conflicts which plagued its southern neighbour (MacLennan, 1949, p. 420-1). The confederation of Canada posed a unique social challenge– the need to forge a national identity from

geographically, religiously, culturally, and linguistically disparate groups. As the North had come to provide Canadians with a subject of national significance and resonance – one with which Canadians of all backgrounds identified on a certain level – the North came to be increasingly seen as an important symbol of the country.

Several prominent intellectuals, including Alexander Morris, Charles Mair and R.G. Haliburton, began to advance their idea of Canada as "a Northern country inhabited by the descendants of Northern races" (Grant, 2010, p. 138). After the confederation of Canada in 1867, Morris, Haliburton and others promoted the notion of Canada as an inherently "Northern country," noting that the confederation of the colonies, while politically significant, "created as little excitement among the masses as they would feel in the organization of a joint stock company" (Haliburton, 1869, p. 1). Promoting what they referred to as the "Canada First" movement, Morris and his associates believed that the populace of this new country should be unified and inspired through a strong national identity. Whereas linguistic, cultural, and religious differences caused heated debate throughout Canada (e.g., the Manitoba Schools Question[1], the conscription debates during the two World Wars[2], etc.), both Anglophones and Francophones were able to identify with the North due to its Aboriginal majority population which had little influence in politics of the day. Even as the federal government took steps to assimilate the Aboriginal population into a "civilized" Western society, the appropriation of Northern

[1] In the 1880s and 1890s, changes regarding access to French-language education in Manitoba led to national discussion and debate of the place of the French language in Canada, with particularly strong opinions emanating from Québec. For further information, see Silver, A.I. (2011). Manitoba Schools and the Rise of Bilingualism. In Christian Lauprecht (Ed.), *Essential Readings in Canadian Constitutional Politics* (p. 290-311). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

[2] During the First and Second World Wars, the need to sustain personnel levels for service in Europe led to limited forms of male conscription in Canada – policies that were supported by a majority of Anglophone Canadians, but strongly opposed by the Francophone minority. For further information, see Harbour, Frances V. (1989). Conscription and Socialization: Four Canadian Ministers. *Armed Forces and Society,* 15(2), 227-247.

Aboriginal traditions and symbols "performed an important function in the construction of an idealized Canadian narrative" (Arnold, 2012, p. 117).

Canadian Political Context

As with those in other federal states, Canadian political parties are forced to balance the differing, and often competing, interests of the various provinces and regions of the country. Policies that may be beneficial to one province may be neutral or even detrimental to another. Many scholars have characterized the Canadian federation as one of "executive federalism;" rather than cooperating on issues of common concern, the sub-national governments (i.e., provinces) compete with one another, each seeking to advance its own priorities, even at the expense of others' priorities (Meekison and Telford, 2002, p. 6). As a result, regionalism is "a continual problem in Canadian politics" (Sutherland, 1996, p. 497).

While regionalism often places the provinces in opposition to one another, national campaigns, not regional or local ones, tend to have the greatest impact upon voters' intentions in Canadian federal elections (Carty, 2000, p. 179). As a result, Canadian political parties are encouraged to develop platforms based upon issues of national significance. However, owing to social and political cleavages previously noted, it is often difficult to find issues that unify Canadians (Ruhl, 2008, p. 26). As a result, parties are often forced to "take both sides of fundamental cleavages, rather than taking opposing sides" (*Ibid*). This has created a political system that specializes in compromise and "the middle ground," with policies, politicians, and political parties often seen as bland and uninteresting. This malaise, combined with a general decline of trust in politicians and political institutions, has resulted in an electorate that is

increasingly "disengaged, sceptical and cynical about politics and its practitioners" (Belanger and Nadeau, 2005, p. 122).

The Conservative Government's Northern Focus

As a matter of routine, the North does not figure prominently in public discussion or government policy, leading some to characterize the region as a colony of the country (Saunders, 2010). However, perceived threats to the North have served to strengthen Canadian attachment to the region and are often met with public outcry for government action (e.g., Head and Trudeau, 1995). Recently, discussion of new and emerging challenges has increased concern that Canadian sovereignty in the region may be compromised or challenged. A 2011 poll by the Munk School of Global Affairs showed that Canadians considered protection of Canadian sovereignty in the North to be Canada's "most important foreign policy priority," owing to its status as "a corner stone of national identity" (Munk School, 2011, p. 6). As such, the Conservative government has been pursuing policies and decisions that are projected as protecting Canadian sovereignty in the North.

For example, in *Canada's Northern Strategy* the federal government stresses the need to "protect" Canadian sovereignty in the region, listing it as the government's first priority (Canada, 2009, p. 2). To this end, *Canada's Northern Strategy* states the need to ensure that the Canadian government has "the capability to protect and patrol the land, sea and sky in our sovereign Arctic territory" (Canada, 2009, p. 9). It goes on to note new projects and platforms to this end, including a new deep-water fuelling facility, an Arctic Training Centre and the expansion of the Canadian Rangers, a sub-component of the Army Reserve, drawn largely from Northern Aboriginal communities. While *Canada's Northern Strategy* does note that potential threats or

challenges in the region may be addressed through diplomatic means, the necessity of an expanded CAF presence in the North is clearly emphasized (Canada, 2009, p. 10).

While climate change continues to elicit debate, its effects have become readily apparent in the North. Longer ice-free summers have facilitated greater economic activity in the region (shipping, mining, etc.) as previously inaccessible natural resources become available for extraction and use. However, there is now a growing perception of "a frantic race to claim ownership of the Arctic's mineral-rich seabed and freedom of passage through northern sea route" (Grant, 2010, p. 429). Rather than posing entirely new threats to states, climate change "triggers and amplifies international insecurity and widening instabilities by overstretching the capacities of states" (Buchmann et. al, 2008, p. 170). Security concerns already exist in the North; a warmer climate in the North will not necessarily create new security concerns, but may exacerbate existing issues, such as environmental and ecological concerns and the fear of increased illegal activity.

Although climate change may alter the security environment of Canada's North, it will do so for other Northern states as well. The Russian Federation, Norway, Denmark (Greenland), the United States (Alaska), Iceland, Sweden and Finland can all expect to gain greater access to previously inaccessible resources and maritime shipping routes in the longer-term. In contrast, many leading experts argue that the Northwest Passage will not be a viable international shipping route in the near future (Griffiths, 2003, p. 259-262; Arctic Council, 2009, p. 114, 119-121). Despite this, the remote possibility of inter-state tension involving the North continues to garner media and public attention (Raineault and Sher, 2009). Huebert notes that:

> Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States have all either begun to rebuild their Arctic capabilities, or have indicated their plans to do so in the near future . . . [and] are increasingly becoming concerned about maintaining their ability to protect and defend their interests (Huebert, 2010, p. 4-5).

In the aftermath of the Cold War, military forces oriented toward the North were largely reduced or dismantled as the threat of interstate conflict diminished (Findley and, 2006, p. 25, 27). In most instances, increased military activity and planning centred in the present is simply a by-product of ongoing modernization and reform efforts. Federal policy documents do not anticipate any military confrontation in the North and expect international disputes to be resolved adequately through international forums (e.g., Department of Defense, 2011, p. 8, 9, 12).

Another oft-cited security threat is that of incursions by state and non-state actors. Since Canada's Northern region is sparsely populated with government resources concentrated primarily in the region's major centres (Yellowknife, NT, Whitehorse, YT, Iqaluit, NU, and Churchill, MB), there is the possibility that those seeking to enter the country illegally may do so through the North (MacDonald, 2007, p. 97). In September 2006, Florin Fodor, a Romanian who had previously been deported from Canada in 2000, was apprehended in Grise Fjord, NU after entering the country illegally through Greenland (*Ibid*, p. 54). In November of that same year, two Turkish nationals were arrested after jumping ship in Churchill, MB and boarding a train bound for Winnipeg. In August 2007 a group of young men referring to themselves as the Wild Vikings – known for "dressing up as Vikings, chasing polar bears, cozying up to walruses and drinking vodka with Russians" – attempted to retrace the 1903 journey of Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen by sailing the yacht *Berserk* through the Northwest Passage (Teeple, 2010, p. 56). After failing to report to Canadian immigration officials, the Wild Vikings were arrested in Gjoa Haven, NU.

In 1999, a miscommunication between Canadian government agencies saw the Chinese ice breaker and research vessel *Xue Long* (Snow Dragon) sail into Tuktoyaktuk, NT with

customs officials caught unaware. As a result, the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence noted that:

> We actually have the capability from a combination of air and space assets that we have the necessary RCMP, customs, health officials waiting at Tuk[toyaktuk] to do the necessary clearance . . . It gets down to the ability to actually have those assets [communicate] so we have a proper intelligence picture of what is going on, so we can then respond (Teeple, 2010, p. 53).

None of these incursions was malicious in intent, yet journalists, academics, and politicians have used these examples to reinforce the notion of the North under threat (Huebert, 2009, p.19, Coates et. al, 2008, p. 139-140). Despite this, government services already present in the region – chief among them the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) and CIS – have proven effective in addressing those situations that have arisen to date. While improvements can undoubtedly be made, their effectiveness suggests that the improvement of existing government services in the region, particularly improvements to communication, may be the most effective means of addressing potential security concerns in the North.

Case Study: Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the North

In recent years, the Canadian public has become increasingly supportive of the military and those who serve in uniform. In the aftermath of the first Canadian casualties in Afghanistan and continued media coverage of Canadian combat operations in the country, support for and understanding of the personnel of the CAF increased to the point where "Canadians rallied around the CAF . . . and polls showed that the public held the military in ever greater esteem" (Lagassé and Sokolsky, 2009, p. 28). In the 2006 federal election, the Conservative Party made numerous defence-related commitments, both to reflect the party's positive perception of the

CAF and "to benefit from the growing popularity of the armed forces" (Lagassé and Sokolsky, 2009, p. 26). Further positive exposure to the personnel and practices of the CAF came with public support for relief missions in Louisiana, Haiti, Northern Ontario, Eastern Québec and Manitoba as well as security operations at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics and the Toronto G-20 Summit. A 2011 poll conducted by Ipsos Reid found that CAF members were among "the most trusted profession[als]" in Canada (Ipsos Reid, 2011, p. 1). The survey response of trust of 72 percent in 2011 represents a 15 percent increase over the results of the same survey in 2003. In contrast, national politicians were deemed trustworthy by only 9 percent of respondents. These figures have remained consistent over time and have been reflected in similar public opinion surveys (see Thompson, 2010, p. A12 and Bourgault-Coté, 2014).

The CAF has a history of being linked with the concept of "safeguard[ing] sovereignty" in the country (Canada, 1971, p. 8). Huebert notes that "stripped of all rhetoric and emotion ... sovereignty is about controlling the actions of others within the boundaries claimed by the Canadian Government" (Huebert, 2009, p. 5). Current government policy regarding both the North and the CAF help clarify the CAF's role in the exercise of sovereignty. In the *Canada First Defence Strategy*, it is noted that the CAF will "work closely with federal government partners to ensure the constant monitoring of Canada's territory, as well as air and maritime approaches, including in the Arctic in order to detect threats to Canadian security" (Canada, 2008, p. 7). The RCMP, Canadian Coast Guard (CCG), Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA), Parks Canada, Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), CIS, and the numerous other government department and agencies all play key roles in the promotion, management, and exercise of Canada's jurisdiction in the North. Joint Task Force North (JTFN), the regional military authority for the North, notes that it is these agencies, not the CAF, that "remain

responsible for dealing with most security issues in the North" while the CAF will provide a supporting role (Canada, 2010). While the CAF does have a role to play in the exercise of sovereignty in the North,

> Canadian [defence] planning should not be concerned with questions of 'presence' or 'visibility' in the eyes of Canadians – this is a problem for public relations experts and political staff . . . to build a role for Canadian forces merely to satisfy the optical demands of political sovereignty would be to build on shifting sands (Lackenbauer and Kikkert, 2010, p. 85).

Overall, the federal government has overemphasized the link between the CAF and North, projecting an image which does not reflect the reality of the CAF's role in the region.

Conclusion

The Government of Canada distorts the role of the CAF in the North by overemphasizing the organization's place within the security structure of the region. This has been done despite the fact that the CAF is afforded a supporting role to other government agencies. Recognizing the positive association Canadian have with the North, as well as the popular public perception of and trust in the CAF, the Government of Canada attempts to bolster its political capital by emphasizing the involvement of the CAF in the region. The government continues to draw attention to public concern regarding the security and sovereignty of what is seen to be an integral part of Canadian identity, despite the fact that many of the "threats" discussed are minor. Other federal government services already present in the North have largely proven effective in addressing any identified security challenges to date. Overall, the CAF has an overdramatized presence in the North. While it does make meaningful contributions to the protection of Canada's Northern interests and responsibilities, the role played by the CAF in the region is portrayed in a misleading manner by the government as part of domestic politics.

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