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A NEW CANADA IN THE ARCTIC? ARCTIC POLICIES UNDER HARPER

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When the Conservative government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper came into power in early 2006, Arctic Sovereignty had become one of the central policy foci. Not only had it featured prominently in the Conservative election campaign but it was also followed up by various government announcements and policy initiatives. Thus, it was quickly seen as signifying major change reflecting the Conservative project of a “new Canadian government.” This paper will critically address in how far Arctic policy has indeed changed. It will argue that Harper’s Arctic Sovereignty agenda may be different from his predecessors’ policies but it also shares some historical and cultural continuities, and is closely linked to a foreign policy tradition that is non-partisan, constituting an integral part of Canadian collective identity and national interest. In addition, Harper’s own Arctic policy underwent change since 2006.

Depuis son élection en 2006, le gouvernement Harper a placé la souveraineté du Canada en Arctique au cœur de son projet national. Cette politique avait été affichée clairement durant la campagne électorale des Conservateurs, et elle fut mise en application rapidement après les élections. Elle annonçait des changements majeurs et représentait une partie importante du projet global que les Conservateurs appelaient « un nouveau gouvernement pour le Canada ». Cet article porte un regard critique sur la manière dont la politique arctique du Canada a pu évoluer durant les mandats d’Harper depuis 2006, mais également avant son arrivée au pouvoir. On défendra ici la thèse que la politique qui vise à établir la souveraineté du Canada sur l’Arctique, que l’on attribue au gouvernement Harper, suit et diffère peu en réalité, des politiques développées par des gouvernements précédents mais également on montrera qu’elle appartient à une perception traditionnelle de la politique étrangère au Canada, non-partisane, qui voit l’Arctique comme une partie intégrante de l’identité collective et comme central aux intérêts nationaux. Nous examinerons également comment la politique arctique d’Harper a évolué depuis 2006.

“Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty over the Arctic. We either use it or lose it. And make no mistake, this Government intends to use it. Because 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,” said Prime Minister Harper.¹

Ever since the Conservative Party under Stephen Harper has come to power in 2006, the Canadian Arctic has featured more prominently in both the government’s policy agenda as well as public discourse. Canadians have been

¹ Government of Canada (2007), “Prime Minister Stephen Harper Announces New Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships,” 9 July 2007, <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2007/07/09/prime-minister-stephen-harper-announces-new-arctic-offshore-patrol-ships#sthash.fABCjYpO.dpuf>.

exposed to and engaged in discussions on the country's sovereignty in its northern regions and witnessed numerous policy initiatives and trips by the Prime Minister to the Arctic that highlighted the heightened interest in the region. Admittedly, this new significance of the Arctic might have been more rhetorical than real and not always supported by actual funding and projects but for many political observers it would become one of the defining characteristics of the new Conservative government of Canada. Prime Minister Harper brought the Arctic onto the political map in Canada and pursued uniquely Conservative policies in the region that would set him apart from his predecessors. These policies were defined as unilateral, assertive and at times militaristic.

This paper will examine whether Canada's Arctic policies under Prime Minister Harper have indeed been unique or whether they align with existing Canadian (foreign) policy views and practices. It will analyze the link between the rhetoric of Canada as "Arctic power"² while focusing on the interplay between domestic development strategies in the region as well as international circumpolar politics, especially Canada's chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 2013-2015. Several arguments will be put forward in the course of this analysis. Firstly, it will be shown that the discourse on sovereignty is not uniquely Conservative but shared by all big Canadian parties and has a long historical tradition. Second, within that paradigm, we have, however, witnessed different prioritizations of security-related, developmental and environmental issues under Prime Minister Harper. Finally, it will be argued that despite the fact that there might have been a distinctly Conservative agenda under the Harper government in the Arctic, that agenda in itself underwent change. Especially over the past two years, one could detect a nuanced shift away from traditional national security to more human-focused economic security. If one looks closer, though, this economic aspect boils down to a Conservative business approach encapsulated in the Canadian push for the creation of the Arctic Economic Council.

In order to evaluate the degree of change or continuity in Ottawa's Arctic policy since 2006 it will be useful to take a look at how scholars have assessed foreign policy under Prime Minister Harper more generally. Currently, there is disagreement over whether the Conservative government has brought fundamental change to Canadian foreign policy. Answers vary depending on which policy area is investigated, but also on what aspects of policy-making

² Government of Canada (2010), *Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy: Exercising Sovereignty and Promoting Canada's NORTHERN STRATEGY Abroad*, http://www.international.gc.ca/arctic-arctique/assets/pdfs/canada_arctic_foreign_policy-eng.pdf.

researchers focus on: style, rhetoric, or content. Furthermore, much depends on what exactly the Harper government is compared to: the preceding Liberal government under Prime Minister Paul Martin or more generally Liberal and Conservative traditions in Canadian politics. In addition, while it seems that ideological convictions, particularly neoconservatism (MASSIE and ROUSSEL 2013) but also social conservatism (STARING 2013: 45), played a role in how the Harper government framed issues it is also evident that *realpolitik* and pragmatic approaches to political challenges occurred. Finally, because of inconsistent and incoherent policies in some extremely important issue areas such as Afghanistan (NOSSAL 2013: 26) as well as the “case-by-case conduct of international affairs” (BOUCHER 2013: 67) it is difficult to define what exactly constitutes the Conservative foreign policy agenda. This is amplified even further by the role that Stephen Harper’s individual leadership played. As Gecelovsky points out, “[m]ore than any other prime minister, Harper has sought to obtain control over all matters of policy, both its substance and its communication” (2013: 110). As a consequence of this “micromanagement” (KIRK and MCKENNA 2009: 29, 33), “Harper’s personal faith” (GECELOVSKY 2013: 110) and Manichean worldview (NOSSAL 2013: 29-30; ROBERTSON 2011: 76) impacted Canadian government policies more than is usually acknowledged (BLACK 2013: 222).

Those authors who observe continuity in Harper’s foreign policy relate it to an initial foreign policy “inertia” (BLACK 2013: 217) that was created by the focus on domestic issues and the necessity to consolidate power during the minority government years (2006-2011), the lack of foreign policy expertise and interest within the Conservative party (NOSSAL 2013: 23; NOSSAL and SARSON 2014: 148) as well as the mistrust of a bureaucracy that had long served a Liberal government (BURTON 2015: 46-47). At the same time, calling themselves “Canada’s New Government” the Conservatives wanted to pursue a policy that was different from their Liberal predecessors (NOSSAL 2013: 30). Those authors who see major change in Canada’s foreign policy under Harper focus on specific geographical areas such as China (BURTON 2015; NOSSAL and SARSON 2014), India (SINGH 2013), Israel, Latin America (KIRK and MCKENNA 2009), and Africa (BLACK 2013), or on select issue areas such as health (RUFF and CALVERT 2014) or the environment (SMITH 2013). Some go as far as detecting a negative transition of Canada’s role in the world from the poster child of multilateralism and exemplary global citizen to a “rogue nation” (RUFF and CALVERT 2014: 131) that discredited the traditional middle power approach (NOSSAL 2013) and instead opted for uni- and bilateralism. Underlying this change was also “the idea of a robust Canadian state” (NOSSAL

and SARSON 2014: 152). Others still notice internationalism but qualify it as a more assertive and bold variant that was driven by inward-looking domestic politics and interests (BOUCHER 2013; KIRTON 2012). What all these interpretations have in common is the understanding that it is more the domestic political level than international developments that drove the Conservative foreign policy agenda.

This domestic level was defined by three unique Conservative emphases. First, there is an understanding that the state should be generally less involved (GECELOVSKY 2013: 114; MASSIE and ROUSSEL 2013: 39). Second, if the state does get involved a Conservative government will mainly cater to the “views of its core supporters” (SCHMITZ 2014: 226). Thus, the Canadian national interest is defined in a limited partisan way (NOSSAL 2013: 22) and a Conservative foreign policy agenda is mainly driven by pragmatic considerations and focused on issues close to the Conservative heart such as free enterprise. This emphasis has led to the prioritization of not only international trade and bilateral agreements but also privatized approaches to such traditional issue areas as development policy (ROBERTSON 2011: 79). Bringing in business and non-state economic actors mirrors this partisan approach further. It also explains why Canada under Harper changed its foreign policy towards India reviving dormant bilateral relations (SINGH 2013), culminating in a uranium supply deal in early 2015.³ Third, for Harper “politics is a moral affair” (STARING 2013: 45). As a consequence, government should be pursuing a “principled foreign policy” that focuses on what is right (SCHMITZ 2014: 224). This “radical” (CHAPNICK 2011-12: 153) and “more unadulterated conservatism” (BLACK 2013: 224) is distinct from the Progressive Conservative foreign policy under Brian Mulroney and has been criticized by former Conservative leaders such as Joe Clark for its “disdain for multilateralism” (CLARK 2013: 29).

The combination of partisan-driven politics and normative Manichean conviction does not easily fit into the dichotomous categorization of value versus interest-driven foreign policies. This difficulty is further aggravated by the fact that for some observers the value-driven foreign policy was defined by the Liberal project of multilateralism and Lloyd Axworthy’s human security agenda. Adam Chapnick makes a very important point here when he argues that

³ Steven Chase and Kim Mackrael (2015), “Canada, India Agree to \$350-million Uranium Supply Deal,” *Globe and Mail online*, 15 April 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/canada-india-agree-to-major-uranium-supply-deal/article23967494/>.

Harper's policy may have shown continuity with that of his Liberal predecessor Martin but it is certainly antithetical to the foreign policy approach of Axworthy (CHAPNICK 2011-12: 139, 143).

No matter whether Canadian foreign policy under Harper is best characterized by change or continuity when compared to preceding governments, another question is whether there has been change *during* Harper's reign. While few political commentators saw foreign policy as a priority for the incoming Conservative government in early 2006 by 2011 the Prime Minister was being described as being "preoccupied with external threats."⁴ After acquiring a majority in the May 2011 federal elections Harper even publicly admitted in an interview with *Maclean's* that "since coming to office – in fact since becoming prime minister – the thing that's [sic] probably struck me the most in terms of my previous expectations – I don't even know what my expectations were – is not just how important foreign affairs/foreign relations is, but in fact that it's become almost everything."⁵ However, this realization that foreign policy is crucial to a Canadian government did not lead to the formulation of an overarching international agenda nor publication of a foreign policy white paper (BOUCHER 2013: 61; SCHMITZ 2014: 224). Still, some foreign policy issue areas underwent fundamental change. A prime example is Harper's China policy which experienced "dramatic reversal" from "the simplistic and overly ideological approach that the Conservatives brought with them to office in 2006" to one that aligned with previous government approaches by 2011 and returned to increased engagement with China (NOSSAL and SARSON 2014: 157). As will be argued below another example is Arctic policy.

A final question remains: if multilateralism has not been the first choice of the Harper government what has replaced it? On the one hand, bilateral trade agreements have been on the rise. On the other hand we also saw a slight increase in unilateral practices. In their study of Canada's position on six international crises from 2004 to 2011 Paquin and Beauregard found Canada to be an "improbable unilateral state" that rarely "adopt[ed] a position alone." At the same time they also observed "a noticeable increase in this behaviour under Prime Minister Harper" (PAQUIN and BEAUREGARD 2013: 630-631). While unilateralism may have been rare overall, its currency changed from the Liberal to the Conservative government. In addition, Paquin and Beauregard only studied six international crises that were all happening far away from Canada,

⁴ Paul Wells (2011), "Why Harper Wants to Take on the World," *Maclean's*, 15 July 2011.

⁵ Kenneth Whyte (2011), "In Conversation: Stephen Harper," *Maclean's*, 5 July 2011.

four in the Middle East and two in Eastern Europe. They did not even include the Arctic, which, while not constituting a crisis, serves as a good example for Harper's unilateral approach to foreign policy.

Harper's Arctic Policy

How does Arctic policy fit into the overall discussion on Canada's foreign policy under Harper? First of all, despite the fact that some Canadian foreign policy analyses have pointed towards the Arctic as one of the defining components of a "Harper Doctrine,"⁶ not too many of the studies focus in any detail or include well-informed perspectives on the Arctic. Part of the reason may be the rather unique nature of Arctic policy in a foreign policy debate. First of all, it is not clearly delineated as foreign or domestic policy but brings together different spatialities as well as functionalities. Because the Arctic includes both mainland and Arctic offshore territory, that harbours many natural riches but also neighbours other states with which Canada has some maritime delimitation issues, Arctic policy as a policy area entails foreign, environmental, Northern development, and economic issues, and involves many players within the federal bureaucracy. Secondly, Arctic foreign policy is much closer to home than many other issue areas that scholars have used as case studies to show Canada's multilateralism or alignment along transatlantic ties (PAQUIN and BEAUREGARD 2013). Thirdly, the general narrative of Arctic policy has been shared by most Canadians and cannot easily be dissected along partisan lines. Even though foreign policy attitudes might differentiate Conservative voters from others the correlation between "internationalism and militarism attitudes" and supporters of Harper (GRAVELLE et al. 2014: 125-126) might not be as clear when it comes to Arctic foreign policy. The reason for that is the social construction of the Arctic as an integral part of Canadian identity. It is a narrative that has emerged historically and which underpins any framing that the Conservative government may actively pursue for political or ideological reasons.

After Great Britain had transferred the Arctic islands to Canada in 1880 foreign governments as well as American whale hunters posed a threat to Canada's sovereignty in the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Politicians like Senator Pascale Poirier, who proposed a Canadian Arctic sector in 1907, and explorers such as Vilhjalmur Steffanson, whose many Arctic trips

⁶ John Ibbitson (2011), "The Harper Doctrine: Conservative Foreign Policy in Black and White," *Globe and Mail online*, 12 June 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-notebook/the-harper-doctrine-conservative-foreign-policy-in-black-and-white/article615115/>.

in the early 20th century received public attention in Canada, as well as a number of Canadian artists, amongst them the Group of Seven, all helped establish a national image and narrative of Canada as a Northern nation (GRACE 2001). When international events such as WWII and the Cold War necessitated cooperation between the U.S. and Canada in the Arctic, the sovereignty narrative served as a way to uphold a national Canadian identity against closer North American security cooperation (DOLATA-KREUTZKAMP 2010). This security-sovereignty dichotomy explains why Canada is the only Arctic state that places so much emphasis on sovereignty until today. It also explains the historical apprehensions that Canadians had about their neighbours' intentions in the Arctic. When in 1969 the U.S. oil company *Humble Oil* sent a ship from Alaska through the Northwest Passage without asking the Canadian government for permission this caused a public outcry. Canadians were equally outraged when the U.S. coast guard ship *Polar Sea* shipped through the Northwest Passage in 1985.

There is another main reason why Arctic policy should not be simply subsumed under foreign policy and that is that it is not consistent with some of the findings of the above-mentioned investigations of Canada's foreign policy under Harper. While the 2006 Conservative election platform might have represented a "*tabula rasa*" (NOSSAL 2013: 25) it seemed quite developed on the question of Arctic sovereignty, which became a core issue of that platform (LACKENBAUER and HUEBERT 2014: 323). Another thesis that does not sit well with the Arctic case is Massie and Roussel's argument that Harper's approach to foreign engagement is partly characterised by neocontinentalism (MASSIE and ROUSSEL 2013: 41-48). Close security and defence relations with the United States led Canadian decision-makers to see "the US [not] as a threat to Canadian sovereignty" but "as a benevolent hegemon" (MASSIE and ROUSSEL 2013: 48). During the 2006 election campaign Harper did indeed promise better relations with the United States but shortly after having assumed power he disagreed publicly with the US ambassador with respect to the Northwest Passage (NOSSAL 2007: 27). In fact, for most Canadians the most imminent threat to Canadian sovereignty in the high North is posed by its ally to the South and not by Russia from across the North Pole. After all, it was a U.S. oil company that sent a tanker through the Northwest Passage in 1969 without official authorization from Ottawa and the U.S. coast guard ship *Polar Sea* that traversed the passage again in 1985. And it was Conservative prime minister Diefenbaker and Mulroney who portrayed themselves as defenders of Canada's high North. Finally, the public support for a more assertive Arctic policy along the lines of Harper's rhetoric stands in direct opposition to the findings of Paris'

study of various opinion polls that showed that the Canadian public did not follow the Conservative redefinition of Canada's role in the world (PARIS 2014). Here is an issue area where the Canadian public is in fact closely aligned to the Conservative foreign policy narrative.

A New Conservative Arctic Policy?

Already in December 2005, while still campaigning for the federal election, Stephen Harper announced an Arctic Sovereignty policy in case the Conservatives would win. He criticized the Liberal government for not addressing this "crucial issue of national sovereignty" and warned that it was "time to act." He promised that a "Conservative government [would] make the military investments needed" outlining a plan that aimed at increasing military presence in the Arctic and included ship monitoring systems, icebreakers, deep-water harbours, search-and-rescue and surveillance aircrafts, military training centres and support for the Canadian Rangers.⁷ These were all part of the Conservative "Canada First" defence strategy. The emphasis on hard security led many analysts to describe Harper's Arctic policy as one driven by "an aggressive assertion of Canadian strength" (CHAPNICK 2011-12: 153) through militarization and securitization based on a "vision of Canada as a valiant fighter" (PARIS 2014: 275) or in Harper's own words "courageous warrior."⁸

As a consequence, for a number of authors Arctic policy constitutes one of the areas that clearly show the changes that a Conservative government introduced (GENEST and LASSERRE 2015; MANICOM 2013: 66; ROBERTSON 2011: 78). There has been a clear shift from Liberal Prime Minister Martin to Conservative Prime Minister Harper in that the latter "more than others, has made the Arctic a key national/foreign policy priority" (CHARRON, PLOUFFE and ROUSSEL 2012: 45-46). This points towards an important caveat. The changes that came with the Conservatives were not necessarily paradigmatic but one of degree. The theme of Arctic sovereignty was merely used in an "inflationary" manner by the Conservative government (GENEST and LASSERRE 2015: 64). Such an interpretation would also reconcile the fact that in 2006 the Liberals also campaigned with a clear program of building up defence capabilities in the Arctic to defend the region (LIBERAL PARTY 2006: 42). The new Conservative government only played an already existing "Arctic card" (NOSSAL 2007: 28, 33) framing Arctic issues in a specific way for either

⁷Stephen Harper (2005), "Harper Stands Up for Arctic Sovereignty," 22 December 2005, http://www.dennisbevington.ca/pdfs/en/2005/dec25-05_speech-harper.pdf.

⁸ Whyte (2011), "In Conversation."

electoral gain or in order to garner support for an increased defence budget (GENEST and LASSERRE 2015; LACKENBAUER 2011: 4, 6; NOSSAL 2007: 28-29). This securitization in itself did not represent a radical shift from the preceding Liberal government who had already reintroduced annual military exercises in the North and used some of the very same rhetoric and discourses of Arctic sovereignty that had been around since the 1950s (GENEST and LASSERRE 2015: 64, 66).

This hard security posture further manifested itself in the way that Prime Minister Martin dealt with the Hans Island issue in the early 2000s (HUEBERT 2005: 321-327; MANICOM 2013: 65; NOSSAL 2007: 33). Hans Island is a barren uninhabited island located between Ellesmere Island and Greenland that both Denmark and Canada claim as theirs. The dispute that goes back to the mid-1980s (HUEBERT 2005: 323) made national news headlines in 2004-2005 when in a tit-for-tat fashion Danish and Canadian officials engaged in military posturing. However, it was the Conservative Party who seized the moment and criticized the Liberal government for its cuts to the military budget and hence its inability to defend Hans Island against Danish encroachments. Prime Minister Martin had to counteract such allegations and in March 2004, Minister of Foreign Affairs Bill Graham announced that Canada would defend its sovereignty in the Arctic and that Hans Island was Canadian (HUEBERT 2005: 326).

Apart from these domestic pressures there were also external developments, particularly climate change discussions in the early 2000s, that necessitated a response from the Liberal governments of Prime Minister Chrétien and Martin. This renewed interest was reflected in two policy documents: the 2000 *Northern Dimension of Canada's Foreign Policy* and the 2005 *International Policy Statement*. The *Northern Dimension* was the result of extensive public and intra-bureaucracy consultations following a 1997 House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade report entitled "Canada and the Circumpolar World: Meeting the Challenges of Co-operation into the 21st Century." It recognized a "new reality of Canada's North" which was not only driven by challenges such as climate change and global interest in resource exploration in Canada's Arctic but also opportunities that emerged through the creation of Nunavut in 1999. Security was linked to human and environmental security and less to traditional concepts of military security and hard power. Recognizing that meeting these combined challenges would need efforts on the domestic as well as foreign policy side, it called for a comprehensive inter-departmental approach. Throughout the document one

finds inclusive and cooperative language especially with respect to a circumpolar – as opposed to a national Canadian – political space as well as references to indigenous communities that are defined by a government-to-government approach. One of the recommendations included the creation of a Circumpolar Chamber of Commerce. Thus, it proposed to employ diplomacy and trade to ensure sustainable development in the Arctic. As we will see below the Conservative government under Prime Minister Harper initiated something similar with the creation of the Arctic Economic Council in 2014.⁹

Like the *Northern Dimension* the 2005 *International Policy Statement: A Role of Pride and Influence in the World* (IPS) acknowledged that climate change and the opening of the Arctic made it necessary for the Canadian government “to monitor and control events in its sovereign territory” and it singled out the Arctic as one of three geographical world areas that needed increased attention and action.¹⁰ In its “Diplomacy” section the IPS promised to “put renewed emphasis on the promotion of our Arctic sovereignty and circumpolar cooperation goals.” It essentially reiterated the cooperative and “people-to-people” approach as well as the developmental and environmental perspectives while it also vowed “to enhance [Canada’s] sovereignty.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, the “Defence” section linked the protection of sovereignty more directly with hard security. While acknowledging that threats were no longer of the conventional nature as they were during the Cold War the military was assigned an active role in ensuring the “sovereignty and security of [Canada’s] territory.” This shows that the Liberal government had already reintroduced the link between sovereignty and security with respect to the Arctic, the difference was more about the prioritization of the tools of ensuring both. While the Liberals generally favoured diplomacy the Conservatives opted for more robust defence options (LACKENBAUER 2011: 6). However, this is not to say that the Liberals under Martin did not acknowledge that the military would play a role in “assert[ing] Canada’s interest in this vital region of the country.”¹² To come back to Chapnick’s earlier argument, the Conservatives might have focused on the “protection of sovereignty that Axworthy had dismissed as *passé*”

⁹ Government of Canada (2000), *Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy*, http://library.arcticportal.org/1255/1/The_Northern_Dimension_Canada.pdf, 2, 5-7, 9.

¹⁰ Government of Canada (2005), *Canada’s International Policy Statement: A Role of Pride and Influence in the World – Overview*, <http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.687242/publication.html>, 7, 30.

¹¹ Ibid (2005), *Canada’s International Policy Statement: A Role of Pride and Influence in the World – Diplomacy*, <http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.687431/publication.html>, 4, 8.

¹² Ibid (2005), *Canada’s International Policy Statement: A Role of Pride and Influence in the World – Defence*, <http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.687487/publication.html>, 17-18.

(CHAPNICK 2011-12: 143) but it certainly was not as antithetical to the Liberal approach under Martin. Arctic sovereignty in itself did not signify fundamental change but the prioritization of Arctic policy within the Conservative foreign policy agenda did.

Even though there might have been some overlap with previous Liberal governments a closer look at the relevant Conservative policy documents reveals two important differences. First, the early policy discussions after the Conservatives came to power in 2006 were based on the primacy of hard security and defence-related matters. Second, these policies were driven by an inward-looking, exclusively defined national interest that was defended in the North. The Harper government changed the tone of Arctic politics and policy. While earlier Liberal documents such as the *Northern Dimension* were highlighting the interconnectedness and internationality of the circumpolar region, the Harper discourse was focussing much more on Canadian national interest. In 2000 the Chrétien government reminded Canadians that “[t]he Arctic identity that Canada shares with Russia provides a special basis for co-operation focussing on the North.”¹³ In contrast, Harper fell back on a separate Canadian identity that was Northern but distinct from the “other” Arctic nations, especially Russia but also the United States. Admittedly, the Russia of the late 1990s was different from the Russia in the new millennium. Still, the very outspoken Canadian condemnations of the planting of a Russian titanium flag on the floor of the sea at the North Pole by a Russian *Duma* member in 2007 and the ensuing “public verbal sparring” (EXNER-PIROT 2012: 201) were a far cry from the kind of diplomatic *rapprochement* that the Liberal government under Jean Chrétien had proposed in 2000.

Until 2009, Conservative Arctic policy was characterized by the linkage between security and sovereignty as well as the focus on hard power. Most official speeches that addressed the Arctic came from the Prime Minister and the Department of Defense (GENEST and LASSERRE 2015: 67). The 2008 *Canada First Defence Strategy* put emphasis on defending Canada’s territory and sovereignty in the Arctic and promised increased defence spending explaining that “the Canadian Forces must have the capacity to exercise control over and defend Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic.” It declared the Arctic as one of its six core missions, announcing funding of surveillance equipment including radars and satellites and renewing earlier announcements that it

¹³ Government of Canada (2000), *Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy*, 15.

would build Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ships.¹⁴ The prioritization of Arctic sovereignty peaked with the *Canada First Defence Strategy* and the Conservative election platform which was entitled “The True North Strong and Free,” a line taken from the national anthem in English which does not exist in the French version and which had also been used as an entry statement on the government’s website (www.gc.ca) together with a range of iconic pictures of Canada as a northern country, amongst them a photograph of a polar bear. These “innocuous” references allowed the Conservative party to establish a pan-Canadian patriotism that was not part of a Liberal tradition but a Conservative one and mirrored attempts by the Harper government to realign Canadian politics.¹⁵ The increased importance of Arctic sovereignty for defining the Conservative project may be gauged from the fact that in the very first paragraphs of the 2008 platform the Conservatives promised that they were “defending [Canada’s] sovereignty over the vast Canadian Arctic.”¹⁶

A Changing Conservative Arctic Policy?

The very first explicit Arctic policy document that the Conservative government published was the 2009 *Canada’s Northern Strategy*. In line with previous speeches and the *Canada First Defence Strategy* one of the four priority areas was “exercising [...] Arctic sovereignty” through “putting more boots on the Arctic tundra, more ships in the icy water and a better eye-in-the-sky.” It reiterated the earlier defence commitments such as new patrol ships, the establishment of an army training centre, further support for the Canadian Rangers, a deep-water port at Nanisivik and construction of a new polar-class icebreaker, which would be named John G. Diefenbaker, after the Conservative Prime Minister who not only officially created the Canadian Coast Guard in 1962 but also pursued a national development policy in the North. The other three priorities focused on development, environment and Northerners. The inclusion of those non-military objectives provided a first glimpse of a slight shift within government views on Arctic policy, away from hard security to human development. The document acknowledged that “Canada’s North [was] first and foremost about people”. It spelled out a number of initiatives that

¹⁴ Government of Canada (2008), *Canada First Defence Strategy*, http://www.forces.gc.ca/assets/FORCES_Internet/docs/en/about/CFDS-SDCD-eng.pdf, 8, 10, 12, 18.

¹⁵ Andrew Coyne (2008), “Harper’s Patriot Games,” *Maclean’s*, 8 September 2008: 22-23.

¹⁶ Conservative Party of Canada (2008), *The True North Strong and Free: Stephen Harper’s Plan for Canadians*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2008pc_plt_eng_13112008_193556.pdf, 2.

would address health and infrastructure challenges and attract investment in the Arctic including the establishment of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency as well as Geo-Mapping for Energy and Minerals. While these were expected to create jobs for Northerners they also aligned with a pro-business Conservative ideology. Still, the frequent use of the concept of stewardship throughout the document as well as the much more conciliatory position towards the United States and Russia and the emphasis on cooperation highlighted the move away from exclusive hard security discussions and instruments. Existing maritime boundary disputes with the US and Denmark were now downplayed as “managed disagreements” and the strategy concluded with a section on the 2008 Declaration of Ilulissat to show the diplomatic and cooperative nature of circumpolar relations.¹⁷

What the strategy document did not mention was that the declaration was issued at a summit of the five Arctic littoral states (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Russia and the United States), a meeting outside the intergovernmental Arctic Council and hence without any attendance of indigenous groups, who are permanent participants in the Arctic Council. This reinforced the Conservative focus on states as the dominant legitimate actors in the international realm (SMITH 2013) and may also explain why in early October 2006 the Harper government axed the position of Circumpolar Ambassador. This position had been created in 1994 and was mainly designed to liaise with the Arctic Council once it came into being in 1996. The first two ambassadors were Inuit leaders. A year later, in 2007, Canada was one of four countries that rejected the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It seemed like the Conservative government did not accept indigenous agency in foreign policy as the preceding Liberal government had. In addition, *Canada's Northern Strategy* did not go as far as to include environmental security. Despite the fact that it mentioned sustainable solutions the environmental priority did not include policies to address climate change directly. Instead it emphasized the protection of “environmental heritage” and focused on conservation through the creation or expansion of national parks and wildlife areas in the Arctic.¹⁸

Despite these limitations the *Northern Strategy* already introduced a shift away from an exclusive focus on sovereignty to the recognition of the complexity of

¹⁷ Government of Canada (2009), *Canada's Northern Strategy: Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future*, <http://www.northernstrategy.gc.ca/cns/cns.pdf>, 2-3, 9-10, 13, 16, 33-34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 26-27.

Arctic policy and the inclusion of stewardship. This change was further consolidated in the 2010 *Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*. Subtitled *Exercising Sovereignty and Promoting Canada's Northern Strategy Abroad* the policy statement affirmed Canada's status as an "Arctic power" and declared sovereignty as the country's "number one Arctic foreign policy priority," to which it dedicated the first subsection. At the same time, it emphasized the "rules-based" character of the region and included further subsections on "promoting economic and social development," "protecting the Arctic environment," and "empowering the peoples of the North." Recognizing the linkages between domestic and foreign agendas as well as the different policy instruments the statement suggested both "robust leadership" and stewardship roles. While this stewardship role included earlier pledges to conservation and national parks it also introduced commitment to "supporting international efforts to address climate change." In addition, it made explicit references to the 1970 Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act (AWPPA) and hailed the 2009 extension of the AWPPA zone from 100 to 200 nautical miles as well as the 2010 decision to make the ship reporting system NORDREG mandatory as environmental milestones of the Conservative Arctic policy. However, it did not mention that all these decisions were taken unilaterally and while based on environmental stewardship still elicited criticism from the EU and the US (DOLATA 2012: 75-78). Another new angle to existing Conservative approaches to the Arctic was the promise that "Canada [would] work to ensure that the central role of the Permanent Participants [was] not diminished or diluted."¹⁹ Thus, only two years after the Declaration of Ilulissat the Conservative government had turned around and refocused on Northerners as important actors in Arctic policy. In 2010, the Canadian government also reversed its opposition towards the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was partly drawn up by the Inuit Circumpolar Council, and promised to officially support it as an "aspirational" document.²⁰

There are a number of possible reasons why the Harper government underwent such a change of heart. The 2008 Declaration of Ilulissat caused some criticism from indigenous groups who published their own *Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic* in 2009. Already in 2007, political leaders from Canada's Arctic including Inuit leader Mary Simon, former

¹⁹ Government of Canada (2010), *Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*, 2-3, 15-18, 22.

²⁰ Ibid (2010), *Canada's Statement of Support on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1309374239861/1309374546142>. However, so far the official endorsement has not led to a full legal implementation as the Harper government fears this would be incompatible with existing Canadian law.

Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs, and Joe Handly, Premier of Northwest Territories, demanded a focus on Northerners. In addition, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton openly criticized Canada for not including indigenous groups and other members of the Arctic Council when the five Arctic littoral states met in Ottawa in March 2010.²¹ More generally, having been in power since 2006 the Conservatives no longer needed Arctic policy in order “to carve out a fresh and distinctive Conservative political approach” (BURTON 2015: 48). Once it was clear that Harper stood for a very different approach, the Conservative Arctic policy shifted to include the theme of stewardship. In addition, Arctic sovereignty became less of an issue for Canadians. Even though party platforms included passages on the Arctic, the topic did not play any significant role during the 2011 federal election. Arctic policy became less of a priority for the Prime Minister and was left more often to the respective departments, such as Defence, Aboriginal and Northern Affairs and Foreign Affairs (GENEST and LASSERRE 2015: 67). Overall, Canada moved away from a more assertive phase that lasted from 2006 until 2008/2009 and in which hard security and defence matters trumped any other considerations. After that Canada increasingly looked for cooperation with like-minded Arctic littoral states and a more comprehensive agenda emerged which also included developmental, environmental and diplomatic aspects (GENEST and LASSERRE 2015: 67; LACKENBAUER 2011: 6; LACKENBAUER & HUEBERT 2014: 326).

With the renewed focus on human development in the Arctic, in August 2012 Prime Minister Harper appointed then Minister of Health and Conservative MP from Nunavut, Leona Aglukkaq, to be the Minister for the Arctic Council during Canada’s chairmanship from 2013 until 2015. She was welcomed as the first Inuk to chair the Arctic Council, even though one of the lead negotiators in the 1996 founding of the Arctic Council and first Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs was Inuit activist Mary Simon. Echoing the new focus on northern development and Northerners the government issued an agenda for the Arctic Council chairmanship that combined national and international dimensions of Canada’s Arctic policy and focused on the theme of “Development for the People of the North with a focus on responsible Arctic resource development, safe Arctic shipping and sustainable circumpolar communities.”²² In fulfillment

²¹ Mike Blanchfield (2010), “Clinton Rebukes Canada on Arctic Meeting,” *Globe and Mail online*, 29 March 2010, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/clinton-rebukes-canada-on-arctic-meeting/article1210187/>.

²² Government of Canada (n.d.), *Development for the People of the North: The Arctic Council Program during Canada’s Chairmanship (2013-15)*, http://www.international.gc.ca/arctic-arctique/assets/pdfs/Canada_Chairmanship-ENG.pdf.

of this agenda the Harper government facilitated the creation of the Arctic Economic Council in 2014. In the original agenda it was called Circumpolar Business Forum and while this council may echo the Liberal idea of a Circumpolar Chamber of Commerce it fits very neatly into a uniquely Conservative agenda since it prioritized resource development as a way to improve the lives of Northerners. While the government may provide support for such resource development via geo-mapping activities, the emphasis lies on individual and private initiative. This agenda has been criticized as too inward-looking and uniquely Canadian. In addition, it seemed to focus on Nunavut as the most important region of the Canadian Arctic to the detriment of Northerners in the other two territories and northern Québec. In terms of policies that the Arctic Council dealt with before and during the Canadian chairmanship, it was the United States that was instrumental in pushing for a reduction in black carbon (CHARRON, PLOUFFE and ROUSSEL 2012: 45). Canada was more active in implementing the Arctic Council search and rescue agreement hosting exercises in 2011 and a high-level forum in 2012 which brought “together northern chiefs of defence to discuss Arctic security issues” (EXNER-PIROT 2012: 202). One could argue then, that Canada was still more interested in hard power and traditional security issues. And in those cases where it included soft issues such as economic development, they aligned with a Conservative economic ideology.

Continuities: Arctic Policy and Canadian Identity?

As the above discussion reveals, there have been both changes and continuity under Prime Minister Harper. In this section I will focus more systematically on the nature of the continuities and uncover non-partisan approaches to the Arctic. A look at party platforms shows that there is not much difference when it comes to the fundamentals of Canada’s Arctic policy. The 2006, 2008 and 2011 federal elections have shown that generally the main parties do not differ in their acceptance of Arctic sovereignty as part of the national interest. Already in 2004 the Conservative Party used Arctic security to criticize the lack of military capability. The Liberal Party only mentioned the region when promising that contaminated sites in the North would be cleaned up. And while the NDP platform included a section on “Protecting Canadian Sovereignty” it was addressing independence from the United States in light of the Iraq War not Arctic sovereignty.²³ That topic only entered the party platforms explicitly

²³ Conservative Party of Canada (2004), *Demanding Better*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2004pc_plt_en_14112008_171920.pdf, 41; Liberal Party of Canada (2004), *Moving Canada Forward: The Paul Martin Plan for*

in 2006. With the exception of the NDP who only spoke about Northern health issues, both the Conservatives and Liberals were outspoken about “Arctic sovereignty” and both promised programs that would increase defence and economic capabilities in the region.²⁴ In 2008 all three parties’ platforms contained sections on Arctic sovereignty agreeing on the necessity to defend it. They disagreed, however, on the question of resource activities in the North, which the Conservatives saw as crucial for economic advancement while the Liberals and NDP cautioned against potential environmental damage of such activities and demanded improved oil spill response programs.²⁵ Thus, overall Arctic policy was not contentious in the 2006 and 2008 elections. By 2011 the NDP had dropped any discussion of Arctic sovereignty only mentioning the North with regards to infrastructure projects and the Liberal Party campaigned with the promise to “halt all new leasing and oil exploration activities in Canada’s Arctic waters pending an independent examination of the risks.”²⁶

This was in direct opposition to Conservative government policies. The emphasis of the Liberals was clearly on stewardship of the Arctic, mainly environmental. Another focus was on cooperation and multilateral institutions. This might be seen as different from a security and defence-driven Conservative agenda, however, as we have seen by 2011 Arctic policy had already shifted to include aspects of cooperation with existing frameworks such

Getting Things Done,

https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2004lib_plt_en_14112008_171941.pdf, 33; New Democratic Party (2004), *New Energy: A Positive Choice*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2004ndp_plt_en_14112008_171856.pdf, 42.

²⁴ Conservative Party of Canada (2006), *Stand Up for Canada*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2006pc_plt_en_14112008_165519.pdf, 18, 19, 45; Liberal Party of Canada (2006), *Securing Canada’s Success*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2006lib_plt_en_14112008_165437.pdf, 42; New Democratic Party (2006), *Getting Results for People*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2006ndp_plt_en_14112008_165642.pdf, 21.

²⁵ Conservative Party of Canada (2008), *The True North Strong and Free*, 20, 24; Liberal Party of Canada (2008), *Richer, Fairer, Greener: An Action Plan for the 21st Century*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2008lib_plt_en.pdf, 36, 61; New Democratic Party (2008), *A Prime Minister on Your Family’s Side, for a Change*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2008ndp_plt_eng_14112008_160417.pdf, 28, 34.

²⁶ Liberal Party of Canada (2011), *Your Family. Your Future. Your Canada*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2011lib_plt_en_12072011_115050.pdf, 50; New Democratic Party (2011), *Giving Your Family a Break: Practical First Steps*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2011ndp_plt_en_12072011_114905.pdf.

as UNCLOS and the Arctic Council. At the same time the Liberals like their Conservative counterparts accepted that “strengthening Arctic sovereignty” was an important objective of Canadian foreign policy and that Canadians “should be leaders in the Arctic.” Their contention that “a Liberal government [would] focus on the peoples of Canada’s north” is not that much different from Harper’s attempts at Arctic leadership and coordinating Arctic policy with indigenous groups. What was different was the Liberal call to re-establish the position of Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs. However, with the appointment of Aglukkaq as Minister for the Arctic Council Conservative practice was not that different from the Liberal demand.²⁷

The non-partisan nature of Arctic sovereignty is further illustrated with regards to the North West Passage, which Canada claims as historic internal waters and the US and other countries as an international strait. When Conservative MP Daryl Kramps introduced a private member’s bill to Parliament in October 2009, which called for adding “Canadian” to the Northwest Passage, it received overwhelming bipartisan support (MANICOM 2013: 70). Not only was the Canadian position on the legal status of the Northwest Passage based on a non-partisan consensus it had also entered the Canadian mind as something historically enshrined. As Andrew Coyne so aptly put it in his September 2008 *Maclean’s* article: “Oh, and the fabled Northwest Passage, which global warming may soon make navigable? The one Canadians are taught from childhood belongs to us? It seems we’re about the only ones who think so.”²⁸ The Canadianness of the passage had been socially constructed long before Harper came into power. Arctic sovereignty has always been used to distinguish Canadian identity from the US. In this respect, Prime Minister Harper is in no way different from his predecessors when standing up against the US position on the Northwest Passage. The question is whether this was a calculated ploy to show to Canadians that a Conservative government can stand up against the United States (MANICOM 2013: 65). Such an interpretation would suggest that a Canadian government has a choice not to. Like others I would argue that Arctic sovereignty is a social construct that defines Canadian national interest and identity. As a consequence, as a Canadian you cannot oppose Arctic sovereignty. Arguably then, Arctic foreign policy still belongs into the category of “foreign policy attitudes [that] feature cross party

²⁷ Liberal Party of Canada (2011), *Your Family. Your Future. Your Canada*, 74, 79; Conservative Party of Canada (2011), *Here For Canada*, https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/can2011pc_plt_en_12072011_114959.pdf.

²⁸ Coyne (2008), “Harper’s Patriot Games.”

consensus” (GRAVELLE et al. 2014: 111). Already in 2000 the Liberal *Northern Dimension* document recognized that Canadian policy perspectives on the region have always been driven by romantic ideas and “vague, symbolic visions of the past.”²⁹

This is not to say that Prime Minister Harper has not tried to use the “Arctic card” (NOSSAL 2007: 28, 33) and has insisted that the Arctic defines Canadian identity. In 2010 after travelling the North he explained “we’re doing it because this is about nation building. This is the frontier. This is the place that defines our country” (quoted in ROBERTSON 2011: 78). While I do not necessarily dispute such a utilitarian interpretation I disagree with the underlying assumption of rational actors who actively pursue such framing weighing their actions according to some cost-benefit analysis. Rather, I would argue that underlying such framing is a social construction of the meaning of the Arctic to Canadian identity. Thus, identity does indeed play a major role in understanding Canadian Arctic policy under Harper but not in the sense of “identity politics”. The story is much more complex and informed by historically internalized assumptions about the meaning of the Arctic to Canada and Canadianness. As mentioned above, a Canadian government does not have the choice to not protect the country’s sovereignty in the Arctic. This is not a uniquely Conservative stance; the Conservatives simply happened to be in power when external pressures such as climate change brought the region back onto the political map, like ships traversing the Northwest Passage had reminded Canadians of challenges to their sovereignty in the late 1960s and mid-1980s. In the past it was often media attention and public outcry over potential violations of Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic that drove government action and not active government policies. Of course, the relationship between government policies and public positions is mutually reinforcing. Not surprisingly, in 2011 Canadians ranked Arctic sovereignty as a top foreign policy priority.³⁰

Still, one might argue that the Conservatives under Harper found their unique way of dealing with Arctic sovereignty as an integral part of Canada’s national

²⁹ Government of Canada (2000), *Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy*, 7.

³⁰ EKOS Research Associates (2011), *Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Security Public Opinion Survey*, <http://gordonfoundation.ca/publication/300>, 39. This public opinion survey was submitted to the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation and the Canada Centre for Global Security Studies at the Munk School of Global Affairs. It included nine separate surveys covering the eight Arctic Council states and differentiating between Northern (744 respondents) and Southern Canada (2,053 respondents). Of Canadian respondents, 55 per cent of Northerners and 53 percent of Southerners agreed that the “Arctic should be the most important focus of our foreign policy.”

interest, what Lackenbauer and Huebert call “Canadian hypernationalism” (2014: 320). As Chapnick has argued, rather than using the Arctic sovereignty discourse “to create a sense of national pride” Harper introduced the “rhetoric of fear” which was never part of the nation-building process (CHAPNICK 2011-12: 143). The importance of fear (GENEST and LASSERRE 2015: 65; SMITH 2013: 212) and delineating an outside “other” – whether the United States or Russia (MANICOM 2014: 172) – who potentially challenges Canada’s sovereignty allowed the Conservatives to redefine the existing identity narrative “rebrand[ing] it as a fighting nation” (STARING 2013: 43). In this narrative a sense of Canadianness emerged whenever Canada was challenged: the War of 1812, the WWI battles at Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele, the Arctic. Besides fear, history has become an integral part of the Conservative foreign policy narrative (PARIS 2014: 282-284; STARING 2013). References to wars and Canada’s role in defending the good in the world not only show the Manichean worldview and patriotic function of history but also the defensive construction of identity as something that needs defending and is threatened from the outside by some sort of “other”. Harper himself and those close to him admit that stories are important for Canadian nation-building (PARIS 2014: 283). This explains the attention that the discovery of the *Erebus*, one of the ships that disappeared during Sir John Franklin’s last Arctic exploration in 1845-46, received in the fall of 2014. Prime Minister Harper rejoiced that “one of Canada’s greatest mysteries” had been solved. He continued: “This is truly a historic moment for Canada. Franklin’s ships are an important part of Canadian history given that his expeditions, which took place nearly 200 years ago, laid the foundations of Canada’s Arctic sovereignty.”³¹ However, he failed to mention that Franklin was a British explorer and that Canada did not receive the Arctic islands from Britain until the 1880s. Nor did he thank indigenous groups who had contributed their traditional knowledge to the successful search.

Conclusion

The question whether the arrival of a new Conservative government in 2006 also brought significant change in Arctic policy is not an easy one to answer. While many observed an increase in securitized rhetoric and unilateral practice in the High North it is not clear whether this shift was the result of a unique

³¹ Stephen Harper (2014), “Statement by the Prime Minister of Canada Announcing the Discovery of One of the Ill-fated Franklin Expedition Ships Lost in 1846,” <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2014/09/09/statement-prime-minister-canada-announcing-discovery-one-ill-fated-franklin#sthash.RE138byq.dpuf>.

Conservative agenda or a response to the increasing global attention. While some Arctic policies clearly fit into a Conservative ideology and were the product of Harper's individual preferences they were also based on a bipartisan consensus and historical construction of Arctic sovereignty as an integral part of Canada's national interest. This positions the study of Arctic policy outside established Canadian foreign analyses as it transcends the interest-value dichotomy but also reminds researchers of the importance of constructivist approaches to foreign policy analysis. Hence, Arctic policy is not representative of Canadian foreign policy more generally. More importantly, while Arctic sovereignty might be thoroughly "embedded into the Conservative brand" (ROBERTSON 2011: 78) that in itself does not make it a Conservative policy.

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