



True North In Canadian Public Policy

Commentary

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North American Defence, Arctic Security, and Russian Imperial Delusions

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Introduction

North American defence, Arctic security, and Russian imperial delusions. These are large interlocking topics and my purpose here is to provide context, linkages, and a broad analysis with some key specifics. In the space permitted the assessment cannot be comprehensive but I will examine some of the crucial actual and potential threats to Canada and possible ways to understand, counter, or at least mitigate these.

At first blush it would seem that Canada has a very effective triple layer of protection to guarantee its interests and sovereignty. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an alliance of democracies that has enjoyed remarkable historical longevity, is one of these layers. Second, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) adds to the transatlantic Alliance a defence agreement with Washington, one that has the dual Canadian/US goal of assuring effective aerospace warning, air sovereignty, and the overall

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defence of North America. Third, Canada, as a successful modern state and a member of the G7, has its own significant military capabilities as well as great economic potential.

Consequently it would seem that there would be little reason to be concerned about our security, and much less to be alarmed. And it is certainly not my intent to sound an alarm but rather to try to provide a realistic assessment of how best to guarantee our national interest and security in a volatile international environment. It is also worth noting that despite such volatility we are not in a new Cold War and the world democracies are not facing a massive military threat from a superpower with tens of thousands of tanks and vast number of aircraft ready to march across Europe or intent on devastating North American cities in an ideologically driven war fought for the purpose of imposing some universalistic doctrine. Further, as noted, it is not my purpose here to assess all threats or disputes that Canada faces in terms of its security or even those in the north and specifically the Arctic. Rather, as security cannot be delinked from certain key developments and threats in other parts of the international system, a significant degree of my focus will be on Russian imperial ambitions that have been most starkly revealed in Ukraine, but which have seminal implications for North American defence, Arctic security, and Canadian sovereignty.

Russian Ambitions

Threat perceptions invariably involve a reading of the intent of actual and possible opponents or enemies, and not just an assessment of their capabilities. Since Mr. Putin returned as President of Russia in 2012, but particularly in the past year, Russian claims to the Arctic have multiplied. At one level this ties in with Mr. Putin's strenuous efforts to build up Russia's military might with enormous increases in defence expenditures but it also reflects a larger "Putinite" worldview as well as the Kremlin's domestic political considerations. Already in 2007 Russia made a rather quixotic claim to vast parts of the Arctic seabed when it planted a small platinum Russian flag on the ocean floor at the North Pole using a deep-diving small submarine. More recently, Mr. Putin has instructed his military to pay strong attention to the Arctic, declaring that Russia required "every lever for the protection of its security and national interests there." Further the Kremlin has begun to rapidly reopen and strengthen old military bases in the Arctic and in 2013 Mr. Putin ordered the creation of a new strategic military command in the Arctic by the end of 2014. In April 2014 he declared specifically that Russia will build a unified network of naval facilities on its Arctic territories to host advanced warships and submarines as part of a program "to boost protection of the country's interests and borders in the region".

It is also worth noting that the Arctic, which has a very fragile and difficult eco-system, is generally believed to contain as much as one quarter of the world's undiscovered energy resources and that Russia has been far ahead of other members of the Arctic Council (comprised of eight states) in exploring in the region. A 2009 report by the US Energy Information Administration, *Arctic Oil and Natural Gas Potential*, shows that of the nearly 60 large oil and natural gas fields discovered in the Arctic, 43 are in Russia, 11 in Canada, six in Alaska, and one in Norway.

In a sense, given the extreme dependence of the Russian economy on energy and particularly hydrocarbon exports, it is not surprising that Mr. Putin and his government have made a military buildup in the Arctic a strategic priority. Energy is in Mr. Putin's view one of the very best cards that he has to play. He is playing this card however within a larger Russian policy game that is based on dangerous imperial delusions, namely of superpower restoration via expansion, empire, and manoeuvre.

It is crucial to appreciate though that Russia today is definitely not a superpower (with the sole exception of nuclear weapons) and it is highly unlikely that it ever will be one. It has a GDP that in nominal terms is only that of Italy's (and just slightly larger than that of Canada) and one that on a per capita basis is comparable

to that of Barbados. It faces enormously difficult demographic problems with a rapidly aging population among its approximately 143 million citizens. Moscow is also confronting seemingly intractable ethnic issues with tremendous tensions in the Caucasus. Further, Russia is plagued by a now stagnant uni-dimensional economy that is in desperate need of fundamental structural reform if it is to be competitive in a modern international system. With an economy so utterly dependant on resources, which, again, also comprise the vast majority of its exports (the remainder coming largely from the sale of weapons, particularly to rogue states), Moscow, as noted, is very keen on increasing the extraction of hydrocarbons, for that would bring both enhanced revenue and international leverage.

Mr. Putin of course does have an alternative to pursuing an imperial, energy-based “Greater Russia”. The Kremlin could engage in deep structural reform and political transformation based on the genuine rule of law and respect of rights. Former Communist states such as Poland have successfully done so. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and others have repeatedly advocated drastically transforming what they themselves call “the uni-dimensional economy”. Mr. Putin himself has repeatedly proclaimed his fealty to the rule of law and the vast demonstrations across Russia in the wake of parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012 respectively have shown that millions of Russians not only aspire to but demand such a transformation.

The reality of Russia, however, is not that of a reforming state but rather a polity with, as noted, an increasingly stagnant economy, ever-growing sharp restrictions on human rights, and rule by a cynical kleptocracy. Transparency International rightly ranks the country as one of the most corrupt in the world. Instead of real change, what Mr. Putin has pursued is a kind of “political magical realism” that in some ways is similar to the “magical realism” used in literature; however here instead of a clever literary device we have delusionary politics and policies. There is too frequently an evasion of rational political and economic policy in favour of political fantasy and a ludicrous Putinite personality cult resulting in a political order that is both repressive and risible. Yet, it is important here to also appreciate that characterizing Mr. Putin’s behaviour as “delusional” does not imply some irreversible clinical pathology but evinces instead a political indulgence fueled by a still-disorganized opposition at home and, quite significantly, by feckless responses to Russian aggressiveness abroad.

What we have seen in the Russian annexation of Crimea and continuing threats against the rest of Ukraine (General Philip Breedlove, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, noted on September 20, 2014 that the truce that was agreed to by the Ukrainian government and the Russia-controlled rebels on September 5, 2014 did not alter the bad situation in Ukraine and that there was a ceasefire “in name only”) are thus part of delusionary politics rather than a safeguarding of national interests which the Kremlin could best do by creating a modern and successful state along the lines of Japan or Germany. Instead, Mr. Putin and the *siloviki* (former and current members of the security apparatus) “yes-chorus” that support and encourage him have decided on a dangerous shortcut to legitimacy – a kind of “political drug-induced” euphoria. Mr. Putin’s drug of choice is ultranationalism, designed to keep in power the Russian kleptocracy. Russian aggression in Ukraine, which is an expression of that ultranationalism, has, in the short-term, brought an enormous rise in public support for Mr. Putin (at over 80 percent) and has created an illusion of Russia as a central player in the international system. This is the perspective or delusion that Mr. Putin brings to the Arctic. Like all drugs, however, ultranationalism also loses effectiveness with continuing use, and often requires an ever larger dose. This only increases the danger of miscalculation and confrontation.

The Russian aggression in Crimea/Ukraine, moreover, affects three crucial areas of Canadian interest that also intersect with North American and Arctic security: international law; the United Nations (UN); and nuclear proliferation. As such, what Russia is doing in Ukraine cannot be segregated from Moscow’s policies or ambitions in the Arctic. Facing any threat from Russia in the Arctic and ensuring North American defence and Canadian sovereignty within this larger constellation also means that these should be non-partisan issues for Canadians.

Across-the-Board Challenges

INTERNATIONAL LAW

Russia is certainly not the first or only state that has flouted international law. Nonetheless the Kremlin's brazen disregard for international law when it came to Ukraine, the perversity of Moscow's interpretation of such law, and the Orwellian twisting of the language and content of international law is not only striking but profoundly dangerous. It is a stark warning about the Kremlin's Arctic politics and policies and those who care about international law should be highly concerned.

The sovereignty of Ukraine was to be protected by at least four international instruments. These include: the *Alma Ata Declaration* of December 1991, which governed the dissolution of the Soviet Union; the *Budapest Memorandum* of 1994, which gave security guarantees to Ukraine in exchange for removing nuclear weapons from its territory; the 1997 agreement on the stationing of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine's Crimean ports; and the 2010 agreement which extended the 1997 arrangement for an additional 25 years whereby Russia had been required not to engage in major movement of Russian forces or raise force levels without consultation with the Ukrainian government.

The invasion and annexation of Crimea, the fomenting of strife within Ukraine by Russian security forces, and the continuing threats by Moscow's forces massed on Ukraine's borders flagrantly violate all the above agreements. Further Russian excuses for using military force and claims of legal justification perversely undermine the general credibility of international law for they hold no validity according to any reasonable and traditional interpretation. Russia has no right to use force to protect ethnic Russians within the territory of Ukraine, including Crimea – that is the duty of Ukraine. Russia's attempt to use the rescue doctrine, when it cynically confers Russian nationality on Ukrainian citizens, does not justify the occupation of parts of another state. Further, Russia's claims regarding the doctrine of humanitarian intervention would require that an entire population's very survival is threatened and this is certainly not the case in Ukraine. Lastly, this is not a situation of a Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and Russia – which has been avidly fomenting unrest in Ukraine – with its violent suppression of minorities in the Caucasus is hardly the country to make any such claim.

In the process of perverting the use and interpretation of international law Russia has also introduced, as noted, an Orwellian language that is especially worrisome. Political arsonists become firemen, resistance by Ukraine is deemed provocation, and those who advocate Ukrainian independence are instantly labelled as fascists and Nazis. Moscow's goal here seems to be to make the West look helpless and Ukraine to feel hopeless.

Though in a milder form, we are witness to the distortion of international law by Russia in the Arctic. In 2001, contrary to restrictions placed by the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea III (UNCLOS III) that limit exploration and economic rights to a 200 nautical mile limit, Russia made an exclusive claim to the Lomonosov Ridge in order to assert an exclusionary 1200 mile right in the Arctic, all the way to the North Pole. In April 2014, Russian scientists ominously asserted that the Mendeleev Ridge in the Arctic Ocean was also part of Russia's continental shelf. It is little wonder that Canada felt compelled in December 2013 to make its own claim along the Lomonosov Ridge that extends from Ellesmere Island. It is noteworthy, however, that Canada made an application to the UN Commission regarding the limits of the continental shelf on this matter as an opening for negotiations, cooperation, and possible compromise rather than a blatant assertion, the way Russia has done.

THE UNITED NATIONS

Just as the League of Nations was tested in the mid-1930s with Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, so the UN is being tested by the invasion and annexation of Crimea and the continuing threats against the remaining

territory of Ukraine. The credibility of the UN and its key organs is important, in turn, for the peaceful resolution of actual and potential disputes in the Arctic.

The failure to impose effective sanctions against Italy for its aggression, particularly an embargo on vital oil supplies (in the faint hope that Mussolini would side with the democracies against Hitler) played a seminal role in utterly discrediting the League. With Russia able to exercise a veto as one of the five permanent members of the Security Council and with the current remarkably mild and reactive sanctions that Mr. Putin has so easily brushed off, the United Nations is facing a very similar dilemma. What role therefore could a discredited or very diminished UN or its various specialized UN organs play in the Arctic in the face of increased Russian assertiveness or possible aggressiveness?

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

It is not difficult to imagine that had Ukraine retained nuclear weapons (and the talented and highly trained Ukrainian scientists would have undoubtedly been able to operate these weapons that had belonged to the dissolved Soviet Union rather than the Russian Federation) Mr. Putin, who despite his bullying and bluster tends to be very cautious when confronting real power, would not have dared invade and annex Crimea. In exchange for giving up its nuclear weapons Ukraine was guaranteed its territorial integrity in the 1994 *Budapest Memorandum*, not only by Russia but, it should be noted, also by the United States and Britain – both NATO members. The failure by the current US administration to come to Ukraine’s rescue of course speaks eloquently to the reliability of US security guarantees. More than that, however, the invasion of a nuclear-free Ukraine sends a powerful message about proliferation to rogue states and nuclear aspirants, from North Korea to Iran: if you have nuclear weapons, keep them; if you don’t, get them.

CANADA’S OPTIONS

Deconstructing Canadian foreign policy for the moment by leaving aside Canadian commitments to NATO allies in Eastern Europe and our efforts to reverse Russian aggressions and prevent new ones in Ukraine, what is Canada’s strategic position in North America and in the Arctic? Though the two layers of defence provided by NATO and NORAD are certainly impressive and would highly likely be activated in case of an all-out assault on Canada by Russia, there are key questions about alliance reactions in the case of piecemeal use of force or pressure by Russia in the Arctic. The effectiveness of both NATO and NORAD, we must appreciate, ultimately depends on US leadership and determination and here we need to face certain key questions.

Despite all the proclamation of declinism, the United States remains the world’s largest economy, producing over a fifth of the total output, and the US military is potentially by far the most powerful in the world. But capacity is not the same as actual power. Effective power incorporates both “hard” and “soft power” working in tandem and mobilizes capacity across the spectrum. If the US is not prepared to offer that leadership of combining and mobilizing, in either NATO or NORAD, no other country or countries can provide an adequate substitute.

Let me be clear that the above concern is definitely not a call for US military action. We do however, need to understand the nature of power, mobilization, and leadership and to appreciate that sanctions are coercive measures – that is hard power. It is an axiom in international relations that weakness, particularly when it comes to the use of hard power, can be provocative. Ineffective use of hard power too often emboldens the target. Mr. Obama’s reluctance to use military force is commendable, for reasonable people everywhere would wish to avoid war. His willingness to only “lead from behind” – in essence an absence of leadership – is not mobilizing, however, in any effective way the non-military elements of hard power and the vast array of soft power that America possesses. As *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni has perceptively observed, the United States under President Obama is “walking small.” For Mr. Putin, this seems to indicate a green light

and he has not been hesitant to employ the military option in Crimea (and somewhat more surreptitiously in eastern and southern Ukraine). There is a question, therefore, as to just how emboldened Mr. Putin will remain and to what extent this will translate into significantly more aggressive policies in the Arctic.

What Canada has to invariably conclude from the above is that there are serious questions about the reliability of the United States as an ally in the Arctic, especially in certain potential confrontational situations. Consequently, Canada, if it is to safeguard its sovereignty and national interest, has to reinforce the third layer of defence, namely self-reliance. Faced with increased Chinese assertiveness in Asia, Australia for instance, has decided to significantly boost its air defences. Canada needs to act similarly regarding our north and the Arctic Ocean. In a sense, Canada must improve the effectiveness of both its “hardware” and “software.” In terms of the former, Ottawa will need to make significant additional expenditures and preparations that should include purchases of additional advanced aircraft, surface vessels, among them powerful icebreakers, and modern subs with Arctic capacity. In terms of “software”, Canada should enhance domestic consensus on the need to respond to Russian delusions of empire and specifically Moscow’s increasing assertiveness or aggressiveness in the Arctic. While Ottawa should continue to foster strong diplomatic and military support among our NATO allies and continue to work within the Arctic Council, it should also signal unequivocally to Russia that it is willing to strongly defend Canadian sovereignty and national interest in the Arctic. On September 18, 2014 Canada did just that. When Russia sent bombers near Canadian air space within Canada’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the Arctic, coincidentally just after the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko addressed a joint gathering of the two houses of the Canadian Parliament and received a standing ovation, Ottawa ordered fighter aircraft to intercept the probing Russian planes.

Conclusion

Just as there are no painless sanctions (though effective sanctions are perhaps the best means to obviate the need for recourse to military force), so there is no deterrence on the cheap. It is by reinforcing all three layers of defence, but especially the third one, that Canada would best be able to reduce the possibility of misperception and miscalculation that so often historically have led to international conflict. It is a most effective way as well to remove temptation from Russia and to introduce a kind of “reality check” into Mr. Putin’s delusional imperial dreams. That in turn would go a considerable distance to reducing the risk of conflict. The “hardware” must be accompanied then by the “software” of clear and resolute policies and statements that also have the benefit of demonstrating Canadian leadership. Let us not forget that Mr. Putin in the past has shown himself as being capable of cooperation and compromise, but only when all of his other options are unequivocally removed.

Biography



Aurel Braun is currently (since July 2012) a Visiting Professor in the Department of Government, Harvard University and a Professor of International Relations and Political Science at the University of Toronto. He is also a Center Associate of the Davis Center at Harvard University, and a senior member of the Centre for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies and of the Centre for International Studies, and a Fellow and Senator of Trinity College at the University of Toronto. Professor Braun has twice been appointed a Visiting Scholar at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. In March 2009, the Federal Cabinet via a Governor-in-Council appointment made Professor Braun the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (Rights & Democracy) for a three year term. In December 2012 Professor Braun was awarded the Queen's Jubilee Medal for services to Canada and for academic distinction by the Governor-General of Canada.



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SENATOR HUGH SEGAL, NOVEMBER 25, 2013

Very much enjoyed your presentation this morning. It was first-rate and an excellent way of presenting the options which Canada faces during this period of "choice"... Best regards and keep up the good work.

PRESTON MANNING, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
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