



DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

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April 23, 2014

What do Russian actions in Ukraine portend for the Arctic?

Speculation about Russia's post-Crimean posture in the Arctic has become a prominent sidebar to the Ukraine story. With Russia again asserting a willingness to deploy force across borders to advance its agenda, some pundits and public officials in other Arctic countries have been advising Russia's Arctic neighbors to take note and prepare accordingly. The Arctic, like any other arena in which Russia wields influence, will not be immune to the changing dynamics among Russia, Europe, and North America – a linkage reinforced by Ottawa's ill-considered decision to boycott the April working-group meeting of the Arctic Council in Moscow.¹ But predictions of renewed Arctic military rivalry owe a lot less to strategic realism than to an instinctive default to Cold War categories whenever it comes to Vladimir Putin and his troublesome behaviour.

Russia's tactics in Ukraine certainly require a response, but they hardly signal a new era of vulnerability for Russia's Arctic neighbours. The post-Cold War world has seen plenty of military incursions into sovereign states, but an interesting feature of those military ventures across international boundaries is that they have been launched only against states already in deep crisis. And the obvious and relevant point about the Arctic is that it is not in crisis.

In every case of post-Cold War cross-border military intervention – the United States being by far the most prolific instigator, but Russia, NATO, France, South Africa, and others having at times joined that dubious fraternity – the target country was already enmeshed in intractable conflict, suffering a deep crisis of legitimacy. The point is not to justify or excuse military interventions, but to understand the circumstances under which cross-border military attacks or intimidations are more likely, or less likely, to occur. Stable, well-governed countries in stable neighborhoods are not invaded – not ever in the past quarter century, regardless of their military strength or weakness, and no matter how great their resource wealth may be or how much the powerful may covet what they have.

Since 1989 there is really only one partial exception to that "rule," and that is Iraq's invasion of Kuwait – and even there, to say that pre-invasion Kuwait was well-governed in a stable neighborhood is a stretch, but it was not a country in crisis. In all other interventions the target state was in unambiguous crisis – consider Georgia ahead of Russia's 2008 intervention; Bosnia (1990s), Serbia (1999), Afghanistan (2001, Iraq (2003), and Libya (2011) ahead of US- and NATO-led interventions; Somalia ahead of the arrival of US (1992), Ethiopian (2006), and Kenyan (2011) troops; Lesotho ahead of South Africa intervention (1998); Mali ahead of France (2013); and South Sudan ahead of Ugandan troop deployments there (2013).

In other words, what makes a country especially vulnerable to attack is internal disarray. This is not a matter of blaming the victims, but does serve to point out that whether the objective of an attack is to overthrow a regime, support one side in a civil war, protect vulnerable people, or deliver humanitarian assistance, a primary indicator of a state vulnerable to direct military interference is deep domestic crisis, usually within a conflicted region.

Mr. Putin's renewed Russian revanchism deserves wariness, but in a world still clouded by Cold War instincts, drawing the wrong conclusions seems almost routine – and there are some who are promoting exactly the wrong response in the Arctic.

Sending six Canadian CF-18 fighters to eastern Europe ranks high on the list counter-productive responses,² but we also have security analysts warning that because “Russia has demonstrated that it is much more willing to use force to achieve its policy objectives,” Canada should consider acquiring more combat capability for the Arctic. A particular worry being that the purely constabulary Arctic/Offshore patrol vessels that the government is now planning will prove inadequate.³ Others forecast political “storms”⁴ on the Arctic horizon, warning that “Russia’s appetite for territory does not end at its southern shores,”⁵ and call for “a radical new defence doctrine” for the north to “prepare for the contingency of an expansionist Russia.”⁶ Hillary Clinton calls for deeper Canada-US military cooperation to “stand-up” to Russia.⁷

But post-Cold War experience confirms that the most reliable defence against military intimidation, invasion, or intervention is not additional military prowess but getting your own house and neighbourhood in order. That makes the Arctic one of the least vulnerable locations on the planet. The Russian military poses no threat, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper and all Arctic leaders have been saying for at least a decade, and it poses no more threat today than it did before the Crimean crisis emerged. And militarizing the Arctic it will not help to keep it so.

It is true that all Arctic states, including Russia, need enhanced capabilities related to domain awareness, emergency response, and law enforcement – and much of that will come from their respective militaries, but the one thing that will not make the north less susceptible to Russian bullying, were that now to be on Mr. Putin’s agenda, would be a build-up of traditional combat capabilities.

Stable, well-governed states within a region committed to security cooperation, that being a fair characterization of the Arctic region, are not vulnerable to big power intimidation or attack, and such states don’t need a surge of spending on military combat arsenals to protect them from Russia or anyone else. They are protected by the rule of law.

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, in questioning Russian action in Ukraine and by extension in the Arctic, repeats what has been long-appreciated, namely that the Arctic region has enjoyed a climate of cooperation and a commitment to resolving disputes through international law, especially the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Ilulissat Declaration of 2008 formalized that cooperative spirit. But now, as the international context changes, the Finnish analysts wonder, though in less alarmist terms than some punditry has employed, whether that paradigm of security cooperation is

threatened.⁸ Finland's objective, it says, of seeing the Arctic Council mature into a formal international organization may now be receding. *The Atlantic* joined the general climate of international fretting to re-interpret Russia's military buildup in the Arctic as a "strategic priority" designed to advance purely national, or nationalist, interests there.⁹ At the same time, recent US submarine exercises in the Arctic, with simulated torpedo firings at simulated Russian subs, undertook a "classic Cold War" outing that had nothing to contribute to Arctic stability, sovereignty, or public safety, nor did it have any relevance as a response to Russian ambitions in Ukraine.¹⁰

But cooler heads are also weighing in, pointing out that the Arctic is not Crimea – the Arctic is steeped in, indeed depends on, cooperation in scientific, economic, and public safety,¹¹ making the Arctic genuinely different from the usual hotspots. Similarly, Arctic blogger Mia Bennett notes that not all follow the kind of Cold War formula pushed by Ms. Clinton, citing Iceland President Olafur Grimsson, who warns against Arctic states pursuing the Ukraine conflict with Arctic based counter measures: "We would not need more than an hour to destroy Arctic cooperation....Therefore, one should be very careful with the way they bring each country's conflicts into this kind of dialogue." Bennet concludes: "...[I]t's not really just up to Putin. It is up to all of the movers and shakers in the Arctic to try to contain the geopolitical conflict on the Black Sea to ensure that it does not spill over to the Arctic Ocean."¹²

The most effective way to blunt the advances of an expansionist Russia, assuming that is even remotely an apt description of Russian designs in the Arctic, is by continued cooperation in the region, strict adherence to the rule of law, and transparency and consultation. More military force will not settle Arctic territorial disputes, let alone political differences.

The Ukraine-occasioned confrontation with Russia will be felt in the Arctic, but security relations among Arctic states will sour only if Arctic states ignore recent history and defer instead to the Cold War habits of an earlier age. In the post-Cold War era, anywhere in the world, including in the Arctic, the very best defence against violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity is to be well governed, to earn the support of the population (legitimacy), to develop competent and trusted public institutions, and to promote regional security cooperation. Countries that fulfill those conditions are the safest and, if the experience of the last quarter century is to be credited at all, the least likely to be attacked. Arctic states have been working collectively to fulfill those conditions. The security of Arctic states will be most imperilled by diversions from that collective effort, not by events in Ukraine.

Notes

¹ "Canada Takes Principled Stand on Arctic Council Meetings," 15 April 2014, News Release, *Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada*. <http://www.international.gc.ca>.

² "Canada sending six CF-18s to Europe to bolster NATO forces response to Ukraine," Canadian Press, *National Post*, 17 April 2014. <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/04/17/canada-sending-six-cf-18s-to-europe-to-bolster-nato-forces-response-to-ukraine/>

³ Rob Huebert, "How Russia's move into Crimea upended Canada's Arctic strategy," *The Globe and Mail*, 02 April 2014. www.theglobeandmail.com.

⁴ Martin Hutchinson and Antony Currie, "How will an emboldened Putin view the Arctic?" *The Globe and Mail*, 27 March 2014. www.theglobeandmail.com.

⁵ Marina Koren, "Is Vladimir Putin Coming for the North Pole Next?" *National Journal*, 27 March 2014. www.nationaljournal.com.

⁶ John Ivison, "Crimea crisis forcing Harper to rethink NATO, Arctic defence," *National Post*, 17 March 2014.

⁷ Ingrid Peritz, "Hillary Clinton warns Montreal crowd of Russia's increased activity in Arctic," *The Globe and Mail*, 18 March 2014.

⁸ Harri Mikkola, "The Return of Realpolitik? The deepening crisis in Ukraine may spill over the Arctic," FIIA Comment 6/2014. March 2014, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

⁹ Uri Friedman, "The Arctic: Where the US and Russia Could Square Off Next," *The Atlantic* online, March 2014. www.theatlantic.com.

¹⁰ Mark Collins – Ukraine/Russia and...US Subs in Arctic?" *The 3Ds Blog*, 26 March 2014. <http://cdfai3ds.wordpress.com>.

¹¹ Heather Exner- <http://eyeontheartctic.rcinet.ca/blog-the-arctic-councils-immunity-to-crimean-flu/?lang=en>

¹² <http://cryopolitics.com/2014/03/22/russia-puts-countries-on-edge-in-the-arctic/>