

Canada seeking to cooperate with Russia in the Arctic

October 25 2016, by Clément Sabourin



Ice chunks are seen in the Northwest Passage in the Canadian High Arctic

Despite tensions over conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, Russia and the West have maintained a strong working relationship in the Arctic and Canada's new Liberal government is looking to further bolster that cooperation.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has continued to press Moscow over its

annexation of Crimea and its support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in a long-running civil war.

But his Liberals have softened the previous Canadian administration's isolationist policy enough to allow for talks with Russia on other matters, such as the far north—despite Kiev's objections.

A joint conference in Ottawa has been scheduled for November 24.

Canada and Russia control three quarters of the Arctic.

"Preventing scientists from these countries from talking to one another is irrational. Our government wishes to be rational," Pamela Goldsmith-Jones, parliamentary secretary to Foreign Minister Stephane Dion, said in a speech last month.

"We wish to establish links with Russia—cautiously—because we believe that that serves the interests of Canadians and Russians," as well as "those in Ukraine and Syria," she said.

The overtures are welcome, said a Russian official, who contrasted former [prime minister](#) Stephen Harper's hard line with Trudeau's "greater flexibility" in the bilateral relationship.

Claiming the Arctic



Claiming the Arctic

"It's much better," said the official, who asked not to be named because he is not authorized to speak to the media, adding that Russian President Vladimir Putin "views the Arctic as a region that should be void of conflict."

Russia's opening of a string of bases in recent years—with interest in the Arctic growing as rising temperatures open up shipping routes and make

hitherto inaccessible mineral resources easier to exploit—should not be seen as hostile moves, the Russian diplomat told AFP.

Search and rescue

Rather, the Russian bases were established to support Arctic search and rescue efforts as the need arises along new shipping routes.

"Currently, only our military has the capability to carry out search and rescue operations in the Arctic," the Russian official explained.

Russia is betting on increased shipping through its Arctic waters linking Asia to Europe, and has set up a number of outposts capable of answering distress calls.

In contrast, Canada has been vocal in asserting its Arctic sovereignty, but has been slow to build up infrastructure along its Northwest Passage.



A Canadian Coast Guard carries shotgun to protect scientists from polar bears in the Canadian High Arctic

"We're not going to attack Canada," said the Russian source, laughing off concerns about Russian militarism in the far north, which led Norway to ask Washington to deploy troops in Vaernes, about 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) from the Russian-Norwegian frontier.

The desire to cooperate in the north was evident at an Ottawa meeting last week of Arctic states, organized by the European Union.

The EU is not a member of the Arctic Council, but the bloc's member states Denmark, Finland and Sweden are part of the group that also includes Canada, Iceland, Norway, Russia and the United States.

Created two decades ago, the Council is the main platform for discussions about the Arctic between riparian countries and nations granted observer status at those meetings.

Despite recent geopolitical tensions, says EU ambassador Marie-Anne Coninx, "this cooperation has continued, including with Russia, independently of certain positions taken by Russia that we do not like, such as the annexation of Crimea, which is unacceptable."

"It's the intention of all members of the Arctic Council, and observers, that the Arctic not be politicized. The Arctic is all of our responsibility and must not be politicized," she said.

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