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## **A decade of Stephen Harper's Northern policy: achievements and failures**

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# A Decade of Stephen Harper's Northern Policy: Achievements and Failures

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## **Abstract**

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006–2015) put forward a very ambitious plan to protect sovereignty in the North and strongly promoted it. “Arctic sovereignty” became a key phrase in political discourse during Harper’s decade. This article reviews and assesses the decade of Harpers’ Northern policy. It argues that the North was in fact used as an effective political strategy to unite Canadians around the issue of sovereignty protection, while the initial policies announced were not implemented with the exception of some infrastructure development projects.

**Keywords:** Canada, Arctic, Harper

## **Résumé**

Le premier ministre du Canada Stephen Harper a présenté un plan très ambitieux pour protéger la souveraineté dans le Nord. La «souveraineté dans l’Arctique» est devenue un mot clé dans le discours politique sous l’administration de Stephen Harper, de 2006 à 2015, soit la symbolique durée d’une décennie. Cet article trace une évaluation de cette décennie de «politique du Nord» de Harper. L’auteur met en lumière que le Nord a été en fait utilisé comme un outil de stratégie politique, en vue d’unir les Canadiens autour de la question de la protection de la souveraineté, tandis que les politiques initialement annoncées n’ont pas été mises en place, à l’exception de certains projets de développement des infrastructures

**Mots-clés :** Canada, Arctique, Harper

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“Arctic sovereignty” became a strategic phrase in the political discourse following Stephen Harper’s assumption of the office of Prime Minister in Canada in January 2006. Harper put the North high on his political agenda and announced a number of initiatives regarding the region. As Steven Chase noted, the “‘Arctic file’ allowed Mr. Harper to stand up to the Americans – generally a crowd-pleaser among Canadian voters – not on ideology but over national interest” (Chase 2014a). This article reviews and assesses the decade of Harper’s Northern policy. The author argues that the North was used to unite Canadians around the issue of sovereignty protection as a justification for an increase of Canada’s presence in the region.

## 1. The North and Harper’s Northern vision

The Canadian North first gained its strategic value with the arrival of European fur traders. Initially the Hudson’s Bay Company controlled the fur trade for several centuries. Ever since the Hudson’s Bay Company had transferred all its land to the newly formed Dominion of Canada in 1869, Canada has steadily affirmed its occupation of the North. The federal approach to the North has evolved. In the first part of the 20th century, the federal government paid little attention to the region. Then the North gradually gained importance during World War II and the Cold War for military and surveillance purposes. In the late 1950s and in the beginning of the 1960s the then Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (1957–1963) committed his administration to securing the Canadian position in the North by economic development. Some projects were implemented, but due to high costs the northern development was put on hold. Subsequently, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (1968–1979; 1980–1984) made some efforts to enhance Canadian sovereignty and to promote economic development in the Arctic, which sparked friction with the US. Under his administration the first comprehensive land claim agreements were signed. This policy was continued by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien (1993– 2003) in the 1990s, which resulted in the signing of more agreements, one of which led to the creation of Nunavut, Canada’s third territory.

The latest developments connected with climate change have profoundly influenced the Canadian North. Even if experts’ opinions differ over the cause and speed of change, there is agreement on the fact that the global climate is changing. This has been observed especially in the Arctic. Permafrost and glaciers are melting, severe storms flow across the territory and open waters are eroding coastal banks. The AMAP<sup>1</sup> Assessment of 2015 confirmed a continuation of these large-scale trends for the Arctic with strong regional warming, about twice as great as the global rate. The

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1) AMAP: The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme is a working group of the Arctic Council that evaluates the status and the trends of the Arctic ecosystem.



environmental changes have affected the Canadian North in several ways. The melting of polar ice strongly influences both the indigenous people and wildlife, requiring environmental protection but also economic development. A more accessible North has triggered competition for natural resources and shipping routes (AMAP 2015).

Stephen Harper, a Conservative who became the Prime Minister of Canada in 2006 and served to 2015, put the North high on his agenda. He brought back the Progressive Conservative agenda formulated by John Diefenbaker, but in different political and environmental circumstances. It was a new appointment with a new destiny, paraphrasing Slade's book titled *John Diefenbaker: An Appointment with Destiny* (Slade 2001).

At least three major factors influenced the promotion of the North by the Harper government. First of all, the Conservative Party, despite winning the federal election in 2006, formed a minority government. Therefore Harper looked for ideas that would unite Canadians and increase support for his party in the future. His predecessor Preston Manning<sup>2</sup> had stressed that if the Alliance Party wanted to win an election it needed to be "big". The search for a larger support base was one of the reasons for the unification of the Alliance Party with the Progressive Conservative Party. The North ideally fitted the idea of "big": vast and unknown, an ideal theme to unite Conservatives around. In addition, there was Harper's personal fascination with the North. Together these factors pushed the Conservatives' administration to the North to revive a robust and positive vision of nationalism and to create a concrete set of opportunities and obligations (Chase 2014b).

Secondly, from the very beginning Harper's Arctic policy was based on the fear of external threats to Canadian sovereignty and security. To a certain extent this idea was based on the Conservative agenda dating back to the late 1950s when the Progressive Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker highlighted the importance of the North. Diefenbaker promoted military activities and economic development in the Arctic aimed at protecting Canadian sovereignty. Therefore his government launched a national policy of northern development that was spelled out in "A New Vision", the opening campaign speech delivered in Winnipeg in 1958 (Diefenbaker, 1958). For Diefenbaker the North, with all its vast resources and hidden wealth, was a source of national consciousness (Slade 2001: 74).

Thirdly, climate change made the North more accessible and induced international competition to exploit mineral resources and to secure access to shipping routes. As a result this growing interest, the importance of the North increased, which Harper regarded as a potential threat to Canadian sovereignty.

Seemingly, a combination of these three factors influenced Harper's approach to the North as a symbol of a positive nationalism and proud heritage that needs to be protected and developed. From the very beginning the Conservative government

2) The leader and founder of the Reform Party, which gave way to the Canadian Alliance Party.



announced a number of initiatives to secure and enhance Canada's position in the North. Harper declared Arctic sovereignty a key objective of his government and strongly asserted that the Arctic is fundamental to Canada. This was reflected in official statements and documents on the North, where the issue of protecting Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic is almost always highlighted. For example, in a 2008 speech in Inuvik, Harper indicated that "The geopolitical importance of the Arctic and Canada's interests in it have never been greater. This is why our government has launched an ambitious Northern Agenda based on the timeless responsibility imposed by our national anthem, to keep the True North strong and free" (Harper 2008).

Prior to this, in the 2007 Speech from the Throne, Harper had addressed specific issues relating to the Arctic such as a commitment to complete a mapping of Canada's Arctic seabed, the creation of a world class Arctic research station and the improvement of living conditions for residents of the North. In July 2007 Harper confirmed that "It is no exaggeration to say that the need to assert our sovereignty and protect our territorial integrity in the North - on our terms - have never been more urgent" (Harper 2007).

## 2. The Northern Strategy

The government policy with regard to the North was spelled out in 2009 in *Canada's Northern Strategy* ("Canada's Northern Strategy"). This document provided an overview of the government's priorities for the North and was based on four pillars: exercising sovereignty, promoting economic and social development, protecting the environmental heritage, and providing Northerners with more control over their economic and political destiny.

The first and most noted pillar of the Northern Strategy emphasized that Canada exercises sovereignty over Arctic lands and waters – sovereignty that is long-standing, well-established and based on historical title, international law and the presence of Inuit and other Aboriginal peoples for thousands of years. In order to exercise this sovereignty, a reinforcement of Canada's presence in the North was necessary because "You don't defend national sovereignty with flags, cheap election rhetoric and advertising campaigns. You need forces on the ground, ships in the sea and proper surveillance" as Harper indicated (Harper 2005). The government thus announced a number of flagship initiatives to strengthen the Canadian presence in the region. It announced its intention to settle two small international disputes: over the Danish claim to Hans Island, a 1.3 km<sup>2</sup> Canadian island, and a small part of the maritime boundary in the Lincoln Sea; and with the United States over about 6,250 nautical square miles of seabed right in the Beaufort Sea. In addition, other measures included:



- Recognition of the full extent of extended continental shelf in order to exercise Canadian sovereign rights over the resources of the seabed and subsoil in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>3</sup>.
- A plan to acquire three Arctic icebreakers. Shortly after the announcement the number of icebreakers was reduced to one, which was supposed to be delivered within ten years. Seaspan Marine Corporation / Vancouver Shipyards was tasked with the construction of CCGS John G. Diefenbaker, a second-highest ice-class ship, with a target for delivery in 2017.
- Construction of eight Arctic Off-Shore Patrol Ships with ice-breaking capability with the first ship ready for delivery in 2013.
- Construction of a year-round deep water naval base at Nanisivik (Baffin Island, Nunavut) for the Canadian Forces, projected to operate in 2012.
- Increasing capacity to monitor surface traffic through the Northwest Passage.
- Establishing an Army Training Centre in Resolute Bay as a year-round multi-purpose facility supporting Arctic training and operations, accommodating up to 100 personnel.
- Expanding and modernizing the Canadian Rangers.<sup>4</sup>
- Undertaking regular military exercises in the North.
- An annual summer visit by the Prime Minister to the North.

The second pillar focused on economic and social development of the region. One initiative announced by the government was a new geo-mapping project – Geo-Mapping for Energy and Minerals (GEM), vital for investors. This part of the Northern Strategy also includes investments in infrastructure and social aid.

Environmental protection formed the third pillar. It included the commitment of the government to secure the ecosystem for future generations by investing in research, international scientific collaboration and the special protection of unique lands and waters in the North. The government promised to establish a new world-class research station in the High Arctic, to continue scientific cooperation with international partners, and to create more conservation areas.

3) Arctic states have rights to areas on their extended continental shelves beyond their exclusive economic zones. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) explicitly recognizes the rights of coastal states such as Canada over the natural resources of the seabed and subsoil beyond 200 nautical miles from their coastal baselines and sets out a process by which a state may determine the limits within which it may exercise those rights. The intention was for Canada to make its submission in December 2013.

4) The Canadian Rangers is a reserve force of the Canadian Armed Forces responsible for providing a military presence and surveillance in the North. Most of them are Aboriginal. They collect data, report unusual activities and support military operations in the region.



The last part of the Northern Strategy dealt with the improvement of governance in the North. The Conservative government committed to giving more responsibilities and rights to the territorial governments and Natives' organizations. The process of devolution towards Northern communities was initiated by the Liberal government. First the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement allowed for creating the Nunavut Territory in 1999 and then after negotiations the Yukon government received control over lands and resource management in 2003. The Harper administration continued along this path. A devolution agreement was signed with the NWT government, as well as several agreement with Native communities on Aboriginal rights.

### 3. Implementation of the Northern Strategy

The assertion of sovereignty protection was the main goal of the Northern Strategy. However, the fulfilment of the first priority was not achieved. The disputes with Denmark and the United States were not settled. In fact, in 2009 the Canadian authorities increased the strain on these relationships by renaming the Northwest Passage the Canadian Northwest Passage, thus emphasizing that they are Canadian waters.<sup>5</sup> However, the United States and other maritime countries consider this passage an international strait.

The recognition of the full extent of the continental shelf has not been resolved either and the Canadian case has been pending. In December 2013 the government of Canada delivered only a partial submission to UNCLOS. Since then it has been preparing the other part of its submission. Based on geological evidence the UNCLOS commission will determine the Canadian limits of the continental shelf.

There were major delays and scaling down of the major pledges. The CCGS John G. Diefenbaker icebreaker was presented as an iconic symbol for Canada's presence in the Canadian Arctic. In reality it was simply a replacement for the current CCGS Louis S. St. Laurent, launched in 1966. The cost was put at \$1.3 billion in the 2013 budget; in fact the cost will be almost twice the initial estimate. Latest reports indicate that the new icebreaker will join the Canadian fleet 2021–2022 (Berthiaume 2013). Similarly, the construction of patrol ships has been delayed and the initial number was reduced to five (five vessels were already named), with incentives for the shipyard to deliver six. A contract with the Vancouver Shipyard was signed. The project cost also doubled to around \$3.5 billion. Construction commenced in September 2015 and the first vessel, named Harry de Wolf, is scheduled to be launched in 2018. The ships

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5) In 2009 the Federal Parliament passed a bill renaming the Northwest Passage the Canadian Northwest Passage. As the bill stated, these waterways are historical internal waters of Canada and are part of the Inuit's land.



will be less used in the Arctic than their name suggests: they will only operate in the region for four to five months each year and the rest of the time they will patrol in the south (“Arctic and Off-Shore Patrol Ship Project” 2015). Delay and scaling back also affected the naval facility in Nanisivik. The facility is expected to be finally operational by 2018 only as a seasonal refuelling station; the cost would be around \$146 million (Bird 2015).

The Army Training Centre was also scaled down, but did open in Resolute Bay in 2013. The year-round facility is used as a base for Arctic operations. The centre also assists the Canadian Rangers and provides emergency response and disaster assistance to civilian agencies. Although the number of Canadian Rangers expanded to 5000 from 4000, this force is too small and ill-equipped to monitor the North. The Rangers still use at least 50-year-old Lee-Enfield rifles, which were allocated to them in 1947. The federal government plans to replace these rifles with a new model made in Canada by 2019. The replacement cost is estimated at around \$30 million (Porter 2015). Both the military base and the Rangers have supported the Nanook military exercises that have taken place annually since 2007. The annual summer visits by the Prime Minister to the North commenced in 2006 and serve a different purpose to the military operations. These visits are intended to demonstrate the government’s commitment to the isolated communities of the North and to ensure and show them that they are an important part of Canada. The military presence in the Arctic and the annual tours served as effective communication tools to manifest that the North remains secure within a strong and sovereign Canada. The Prime Minister’s image in military camouflage outfit, while shooting a rifle, flashed around the world.

The government presented several initiatives in the area of economic development, with the majority having rather long term objectives, the exception being geo-mapping (GEM). GEM provides the location of resources and geological characteristics and the primary goal of GEM is to locate areas of high natural resource potential. In 2013 the GEM program was allotted an additional \$100 million over seven years to advance geological knowledge in the North (GEM 2017). The geo-mapping is also an important element to support Canada’s claim to its northern continental shelf.

Hopes for rapid economic development generated by climate change will not be fulfilled in the near future. Although climate change has made natural resources more reachable, access is still very costly, especially when shipment access is limited. The use of Arctic waters as a shipment route for tankers or bulk carriers is dangerous. These waters are difficult to navigate, with unmarked shallow areas, icebergs and unpredictable weather. Nevertheless, since the 1980s voyages through the passage have become more common. The number of transits grew from four to around twenty per year, but mostly by small vessels. In 2013 and in 2014 only one cargo vessel made a full transit of the Northwest Passage. So it is hard to predict an increase in shipping



for commercial use. Similarly, access to natural resources is very costly. The unpredictable climate makes an investment in the North a high risk. That is one of the reasons why the economic development in the North is a long-term objective.

The Harper government only initiated two major infrastructure projects to enhance economic opportunities in the region, much fewer in comparison with those undertaken under Diefenbaker. One project is the extension of the Dempster Highway: the construction of an all-season highway linking Inuvik with Tuktoyaktuk was completed in 2017. The 138-kilometre-long highway, with a gravel surface, connects the Arctic Ocean coast with the rest of Canada's road network. This \$300 million infrastructure extension project was financed by the federal and NTW governments (Bird 2017). The second, shorter-term, project concerns the Canadian High Arctic Research Station (CHARS) in Cambridge Bay. The construction of this \$204 million project began in the summer of 2014 and is expected to be completed in 2018 (Thomson 2018). The Station will provide support logistics and maintenance and accommodation for visiting researchers. There will be a research lab, research centres and training facilities.

The federal government together with territorial governments and Aboriginal communities undertook several smaller projects to protect the environment. Additional terrestrial and marine protected areas in the Arctic were established. Changes to the Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act (AWPPA) extended the enforcement of anti-pollution and shipping safety laws to a larger area of Arctic waters. The Canadian government also signed agreements with other Arctic nations to collect and share data on population status and trends for Arctic species and ecosystems.

The last pillar of the Northern Strategy has been gradually implemented. The process of devolution of power towards Northern communities was initiated by the Liberal government in 1970. Comprehensive land claims agreements provided indigenous people with rights and responsibilities over the Northern land. One of the agreements allowed for the creation of the Nunavut territory in 1999. Additionally, the federal government transferred more responsibilities to territories including land and resource management. The Yukon government received control over lands and resource management in 2003. The Harper administration followed this path by signing a devolution agreement with the Northwest Territories and continuing negotiation with the Nunavut government. The devolution process has had a great impact on decision-making processes in the North. The Northern governments and indigenous organisations are important players shaping the decisions regarding the North.



## Conclusion

“Arctic sovereignty” became a key phrase in political discourse during Harper’s decade. Prime Minister Stephen Harper put forward a very ambitious plan to protect sovereignty in the North and strongly promoted it. This logic of “defending sovereignty” from foreign challenges, as Franklyn Griffiths highlighted, brought a shift from past governments, which favoured recognition – persuading others to accept Canada’s claims without demonstrating a capacity to enforce them – to the Harper government, which favoured enactment (Griffiths, 2009: 435). P. W. Lakenbauer accurately indicated that Harper’s political statements were rooted in assumptions of what Canada should have done and must do to protect sovereignty. Harper’s “use it or lose it” refrain became the dominant political message and became intertwined with a broader swath of unresolved maritime boundaries in the Arctic (Lakenbauer: 424–425).

The government actions left the impression that the Northern territory was at risk but in reality Canadian sovereignty in the North was safe. The small disputes with Denmark and the United States did not pose any serious threats. On the contrary, the Canadian authorities put more strains on these relationships by renaming the Northwest Passage. The United States and other maritime countries still consider the Passage an international strait. However, an ulterior motive may be behind the renaming and the mapping process, namely the desire by the Canadian government to strengthen its position during negotiations on the continental shelf with UNCLOS. Although the government admitted that Canada’s sovereignty was not in danger the government formulated an agenda of what Harper has called a “positive nationalism” (Chase. 2014b). As Jeffrey Brooke indicates, the emphasis on military occupation of the North to protect Canadian sovereignty is in fact a logical outcome of the national myth that Harper’s Conservatives have attempted to lay down, namely the existence of patriotic militarism (Brooke 2015: 338). It seems that Harper used the North as a political means to unite Canadians around threatened sovereignty in order to induce a positive sense of nationalism. These efforts were strengthened by his staging of his Northern trips and the military exercises, all of which were very well covered by the media.

The government maintained that renewed emphasis on the North was rooted in Diefenbaker’s and Harper’s personal fascination with the North, but forgot to mention that many of the so-called new initiatives were introduced by previous governments. The Liberals implemented many projects, especially in the field of environmental protection and the devolution of power. Marcin Gabrys suggests that Harper’s Northern focus was also shaped by the Conservative agenda of the Politics of Memory and by the desire to leave a political legacy (Gabrys 2015: 59).



Although the government strongly emphasized sovereignty protection in its strategic vision, in reality security in the region was not significantly improved during the last decade. The widely publicised announcements of the procurement of eight Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ships and icebreakers as symbols to safeguard the North were reduced and delayed. The same problems plagued the naval facility in Nanisivik. The increase in numbers of Canadian Rangers has not made any difference. Apart from the military exercises the only project that was delivered to enhance security in the region is the scaled-back Arctic Training Facility in Resolute Bay. When we look into other initiatives only two major infrastructure projects went ahead: the Inuvik-Tuktoyaktuk highway and CHARs structures were finalized.

The discussion about the North focused primarily on security protection and long-term objectives related to natural resources and shipping routes potential. Both themes were widely publicised although security was in fact not threatened and the programme of economic development was put on hold. Climate change made the North more accessible but not necessarily navigable. Generally it is agreed that climate change presents no serious sovereignty problem in the Arctic, especially where commercial navigation is concerned. It seems unlikely that major shipping companies will use the Northwest Passage within the next few years as a regular shipping route.

Analysis shows that of the four pillars as set out in the Northern Strategy very little of substance remains. Importantly, Harper did not take up the plight of the Northern people. Their daily needs were not appropriately addressed. However, the communities are challenged by high cost of living, poor infrastructure, job shortage, and poor access to education. The Northern communities would benefit the most from upgrading infrastructure and business development. Already in 2011 Griffiths indicated that Arctic sovereignty in the legal sense was well in hand but political sovereignty and capacity building for choice are the real challenges. He suggested that the latter can be achieved by establishing a new Arctic consultative process between all the principal players: the federal and territorial governments, the private sector and civil society actors, local government (Griffiths, 2011: 419–420).

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, as an opinion piece in the *National Post* put it, after ten years of promoting the Conservative myth of the North, “At the very least Harper has put God’s frozen people in the North back on the political map” (Iverson 2010).



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