

News Arctic & Media

North Pole debate could lead to new treaty: Analyst

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The North is changing rapidly. Predictions vary, but some leading scientists estimate an “ice-free summer” within the next few years.

This means that during September, the whole central part of the Arctic Ocean would be open water with a narrow fringe of ice left along the coast of approximately one million square kilometres.

With these changes comes an urgency to adapt and the awareness of newly accessible resources. But while the rapid melting is cause for alarm for some, other players see it as an opportunity for economic development.

Last month Foreign Minister John Baird announced that Canada intends to claim the North Pole as its own. Canada has filed a preliminary report to a UN commission regarding the sovereign control of resources 200 nautical miles from the boundary of the continental shelf. The country is waiting for more scientific evidence to file their final report. Russian President Vladimir Putin also recently ordered the Russian military to increase its

focus on building up their Arctic presence.

“The Law of the Sea constitutes the overall legal framework for the Arctic Ocean and is recognized as such,” said Norwegian Ambassador Mona Elisabeth Brøther.

“The Ilulissat Declaration of 2008 sets out that the five coastal states bordering the Arctic Ocean recognize this fact and remain committed to the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims.”

Chris Burn, a geology professor at Carleton University who is familiar with Arctic research, says Canada, Denmark and Russia may all have legitimate claims to the area north of the Lomonosov Ridge.

“What Canada has done is start the process that will eventually lead to a treaty or agreement about how to divide up the North Pole,” he said.

According to the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Canada’s primary Arctic foreign policy priority is “exercising sovereignty,” according to a policy document, and last year Canada assumed the chairmanship of the Arctic Council, which will last two years.

Rob Huebert, a political science professor at the University of Calgary who has focused on Arctic issues, says the Arctic Council has done a good job with environmental research but with the opening up of resources, things will get more complicated.

“The public is coming to the conclusion that we’re in a time of peace, happily ever after,” he said. “When in fact we’re just beginning the story.”



The USS Annapolis after breaking through the ice in the Arctic Ocean in this March 2009 file photo.

The United States Geological Survey estimates that the area north of the Arctic Circle has an estimated 90 billion barrels of “technically recoverable” oil, or roughly 13 per cent of the world’s undiscovered oil. It also suggests that the region also has about 30 per cent of the world’s undiscovered natural gas. They expect that about 84 per cent of the resources occur offshore.

In September, Imperial Oil, Exxon Mobil and BP jointly submitted to regulators a project description to drill for crude oil in the Beaufort Sea.

Paul Maddison, retired commander of the Royal Canadian Navy, says that with increased human activity in the Arctic comes

increased risk.

“The key is whether or not we’re going to be smart,” he said.

“It needs to be regulated, with oversight and can’t be the wild West turned into the wild North.”

As Chair of the Arctic Council, Canada has made “development for the people of the North” its driving theme. It wants the council to focus on responsible resource development, safe Arctic shipping and sustainable circumpolar communities. They will also establish a circumpolar business forum to provide opportunities for businesses to engage with the Arctic Council.

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Divided reaction to ‘cultural media’ roundtables

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The outlets were permitted to submit one question or topic and have their picture taken with the prime minister afterwards, 24 Hours reported. That format, and the secretive nature of the event, has led to speculation that Mr. Harper prefers these roundtables because he is free to have his way with an audience that is practically content to bask in the wan light of his presence.

“No one challenged Harper,” wrote the Toronto Star’s Tim Harper on Jan. 17. “It worked just as Harper wanted.”

Shruti Prakash-Joshi, associate editor at the Asian Star and an attendee at the roundtable, disagreed.

“I needed a question to be answered, it got answered and I reported what was going on,” said Ms. Prakash-Joshi. “Do I need to unnecessarily criticize [Mr. Harper]? For what? I don’t know.”

The 24 Hours article also refers to a “fawning thank you from a refugee reporter” at the roundtable, but it’s unfair to say that reporters from small papers “fawn,” said Ms. Prakash-Joshi.

Often, she said, the issues of ethnic communities can differ greatly from those normally played upon by traditional media outlets.

“The issue of refugees, or the fact that Canada has invited a lot of Iranian Canadians into Canada, is a huge thing for [Iranians],” she said.

‘Important to communicate with all Canadians’

Yet while Ms. Prakash-Joshi saw nothing nefarious about how the event was organized or conducted, Asian Journal editor Rattan



A ‘cultural media’ event in Vancouver in September 2013.

Mall, who says he was not invited, accused the government of cherry picking invitees.

“Conservative members of Parliament generally invite people who won’t ask any embarrassing questions, right? They definitely wouldn’t like a guy like me around,” he said.

Mr. Mall says he typically avoids round-

tables such as the one on Jan. 6, finding them too much of a “circus.” Nevertheless, he said he found it odd that he wouldn’t be invited, as he said is typically the case when similar events are held. Other outlets in the region like the South Asian Link and the Indo-Canadian Voice were also not invited, sources say.

For its part, the prime minister’s office considers the events to be just another element of media outreach.

“The prime minister and the members of the Conservative caucus find it important to communicate with all Canadians, including those from cultural communities,” wrote PMO Press Secretary Carl Vallée in an email.

“The prime minister regularly does roundtables with members of cultural media across the country,” continued the email.

“(H)e believes it’s important to keep the Canadians that they speak to informed about the national life of our country.”

Mr. Vallée also argued the prime minister held a number of sit-downs before the holiday break with outlets such as Postmedia, Global, TVA and La Presse, and held a press conference in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, on Jan. 8 taking questions from media present. Additionally, Mr. Harper gave an interview on Jan. 15 to the Globe and Mail.

Regional communications

Paul R. Dhillon, editor of the South Asian Link, was also surprised at the exclusion but didn’t think much of it. It was only when his photographer Chandra Bodalia brought back photos of the event that Mr. Dhillon learned it had taken place.

Mr. Dhillon, a working journalist in the region since 1989 and part of the Link for the

past 20 years, said he is familiar with how the roundtables are organized. Events of this nature are usually announced through, and held at, regional branches of the prime minister’s office, said Mr. Dhillon. His paper, which he describes as the oldest and biggest South Asian paper in Canada, is typically in the loop.

April Lindgren, associate professor at the Ryerson school of Journalism who has focused on local news media, says her research suggests the Conservative focus on so-called cultural media outreach is working in their favour.

In locales like the greater Vancouver and Toronto areas, argued Ms. Lindgren, the population of many ridings is increasingly composed of people born outside Canada. Often, these populations have a high concentration of a specific group.

“That partly explains the Conservatives’ ability and strategy of really analyzing what slice of the votes [they] need and going after that slice,” said Lindgren.

She examined five outlets in the Toronto area and recorded how they covered the 2011 federal election. While none of the smaller outlets showed an explicit bias, on other indicators such as the number of times Conservative versus other politicians appear in the paper and the types of political advertisements featured, the Conservatives tended to win out.

Ms. Lindgren qualified that by saying it was not an across-the-board success for the Conservatives, and that contributing factors to the presence of bias are the size of publication and the diversity of its ad base. It could also just be the party running a more effective campaign, she added.

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