

Canada Intensifies New Cold War With Russia In Arctic

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Canada in 'Cold War lite' with Russia: experts

By Jeff Davis

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Defence Minister Peter MacKay loudly accused the Russians of provocation on the eve of President Barack Obama's 2009 visit to Ottawa, telling the public a Russian bomber approached Canadian airspace.

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Canada and Russia are waging a "Cold War lite" two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, experts say, following news that a Canadian naval officer was slapped with espionage charges and accused of selling top-secret information to a foreign entity.

Professor Piotr Dutkiewicz, director of the Institute of European and Russian Studies at Carleton University, said the Harper government's thinking toward Russia is outmoded.

"The Canadian government is stuck in a Cold-War mentality," he said. "We now have a Cold War lite."

Although official diplomatic relations have proceeded steadily under the Harper government, there is a layer of frost on the relationship that is hampering closer ties and more trade, observers say.

This, they say, is in large part due to confrontational and inflammatory political messages from the Harper government, rooted in a deep, emotional distrust of Russia.

Former Canadian ambassador to Russia Christopher Westdal said the Harper government took office with deep “Russo-phobic” instincts, similar to American neo-conservatives in the Bush administration.

Relations between Canada and Russia have suffered as a result, he said.

“Harper came with that baggage of deep suspicion of Russia,” Westdal said. “It has been discouraging for anyone hoping for better Canada-Russia relations for some years.”

Dutkiewicz said although Russian and Canadian ministers and officials meet regularly, very little comes of it all.

“At the ministerial level there are meetings, but there is no follow-up,” he said. “It seems to me there is no vigour in this relationship.”

There has not been a significant improvement in bilateral relations since the 1990s, Dutkiewicz said. Trade volumes have stalled out at about \$2 billion per year, which he said is a smaller volume of trade than Canada conducts with some small countries in Latin America.

While Canadian firms are eager to do business in Russia, Westdal said, they receive very little political support from the government. The government sponsors trade missions to many countries, he said, but those looking to trade with Russia “don’t get much help, or the royal blessing.”

Dutkiewicz said the Cold War was really about an acute lack of trust, and that in this sense, very little has changed for Canada.

“Formally, the Cold war is over, but this Cold War lite is alive in hearts and minds of bureaucrats,” he said. “We simply do not trust them.”

There exists only a “very thin layer of relations” between Canada and Russia, Dutkiewicz said. He said Canada has no apparent policy direction on Russia, and that Canadian actions have been haphazard and reactive as a result.

“We have had, for the last couple of years, no coherent strategy towards Russia,” he said. “Something is happening and we are reacting, and in most cases overreacting.”

A clear thread running through Canada’s relations with Russia, Westdal said, are actions calculated to score political points with new Canadians hailing from former Eastern Bloc countries. Since taking power, he said, the Harper government has taken many actions on the world stage seem calculated to please Canadians from Eastern Europe, the Baltics and the Balkans, many of whom harbour a deep resentment toward Russia.

“Those diaspora constituencies have been assiduously cultivated by (Immigration Minister) Jason Kenney and others in the government,” he said. “There is nothing new or secret on that.”

Kenney has made a number of high-profile symbolic overtures to these countries. For example, the Canadian government recognized the Holodomor — the “killing by hunger” inflicted on Ukraine while it was a Soviet republic in the 1930s — as a genocide. Much to the

satisfaction of Ukraine and its diaspora, Canada in effect recognized Moscow's policies at the time as culpable for the deaths of millions.

After taking power, the Harper government also advocated very aggressively for the acceptance of former Eastern Bloc countries in NATO. Framing this as a quest to finally free central European countries from Russian influence, Canada was among the biggest cheerleaders for countries like Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia to join the Western security alliance. Russia expressed deep displeasure at this push by NATO into its traditional sphere of influence.

All of these moves, Westdal said, appear to have been calculated to build electoral support among diaspora voters, such as the large number of Ukrainian-Canadians in Manitoba who traditionally have voted NDP.

Beyond diaspora politics, the Tories have used the perceived Russian military threat to justify expensive purchases of military aircraft.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay loudly accused the Russians of provocation on the eve of President Barack Obama's 2009 visit to Ottawa, telling the public a Russian bomber approached Canadian airspace.

"Back off and stay out of our airspace," MacKay said at the time, sparking a media firestorm.

NORAD officials, unlike MacKay, were quick to say Russian pilots were "professional" in their conduct, and underscored the fact there was no violation of Canadian airspace.

Former Office of the Prime Minister spokesman Dimitri Soudas played this card again in August 2010, saying the Russian threat justifies Canada's purchase of F-35 stealth interceptors.

"It is the best plane our government could provide our Forces, and when you are a pilot staring down Russian long-range bombers, that's an important fact to remember," Soudas said.

Loud protests were also made by the Canadian government after a Russian submarine planted a Russian flag on the Arctic sea floor in 2007.

Retired Colonel Alain Pellerin, executive Director of the Conference of Defence Associations Institute, said the Russian military threat is on the wane.

Large parts of the once-mighty Soviet military machine have rusted out, he said, with whole fleets of submarines and aircraft having degraded beyond repair.

"As a military threat, I don't see it," he said. "Their military equipment has deteriorated a lot in the last 20 years, mainly due to poor maintenance."

Nevertheless, he said, diplomatic attempts to smooth relations between Russia and the West — such as the NATO-Russia Council — have borne little fruit.

Pellerin said Russia has not lived up to the high hopes for democratization following the fall of the Soviet Union, to the profound disappointment of many in Canada and throughout the

West.

The mounting need for co-ordination and co-operation in the High Arctic, Pellerin said, is the place he's looking for a breakthrough in chilled bilateral relations.

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