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Unstoppable Momentum: The Real Meaning and Value Behind *Operation Nunavilut 10*

A Policy Update Paper

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Ron Wallace, Ph.D. was formerly a Chief Executive Officer of a Canadian-U.S. defence manufacturer. He has worked extensively internationally, including in the Arctic regions of Canada and Russia. In 2008 he returned to the NWT as Interim Executive Director for the NWT Water Board and was subsequently retained to provide senior corporate advice in Nunavut in relation to the formation of the Nunavut Resources Corporation.

In 2008 he was appointed as a Fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and has published several papers on certain matters related to Canadian Arctic policy and defence matters.

He is married with two twin sons (born in Yellowknife, NWT). He presently resides in Calgary, Alberta.

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As a Canadian International Council Research Fellow in 2008-09, Dr. Lackenbauer completed a report entitled *From Polar Race to Polar Saga: An Integrated Strategy for Canada and the Circumpolar World* (July 2009). His recent books include *Arctic Front: Defending Canada in the Far North* (with Ken Coates, Bill Morrison, and Greg Poelzer, 2008) (winner of the 2009 Donner Prize for the best book on Canadian public policy), *The Canadian Forces and Arctic Sovereignty: Debating Roles, Interests, and Requirements, 1968-1974* (2010), *Battle Grounds: The Canadian Military and Aboriginal Lands* (2007), and *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives* (2007).

His current research includes studies of the Canadian Rangers, the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, high modernism and social science in the Cold War Arctic, Aboriginal-military relations in British settler societies during the Second World War, and a comparative study of Native blockades and occupations.

During the past decade, Canada has routinely conducted 'sovereignty operations' in the remote reaches of the High Arctic. The latest of these operations, Operation Nunavut 10, was completed at the northernmost, continuously inhabited, point of land (82° 30' 58" N) at Alert, Nunavut on April 26, 2010. Canada's celebrated 'sovereignty soldiers,' the Canadian Rangers, were joined by the Danish (Greenland) Sirius Dog Patrol on a joint mission on the sea ice off northern Ellesmere Island and Greenland. Nunavut 10 reaffirmed the Canadian Forces' (CF) capabilities to conduct complex operations in Arctic environments. It also emphasized that Canada's Arctic sovereignty is compatible with the interests of our neighbours.

It is perhaps regrettable that so few Canadians could witness the concluding ceremony. Defence Minister Peter MacKay and Chief of Defence Staff General Walter Natynczyk led the procession of Canadian Ranger snowmobiles and the Danish Sirius patrol dog team into Alert. Nunavut Premier Eva Aariak, Danish Rear Admiral Henrik Kudsk, former Canadian circumpolar ambassador and current President of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) Mary Simon, and Brigadier General David Millar, took the salute from the arriving Ranger-Sirius patrol members. The occasion was further enhanced by the parachute appearance of CF air search and rescue personnel who demonstrated their capabilities to land with pinpoint accuracy. It was an impressive display.

Some commentators may cite this operation as yet another meek, perhaps even tedious, example of Canada demonstrating its sovereignty in the Far North with its limited existing assets. Alternatively, were there some significant, perhaps even historic, factors at work this year at Alert? We suggest the latter.

Brig-General David Millar of Joint Task Force North cited an impressive list of achievements during the exercise: Interoperability with Danish Forces; a successful, record northernmost landing of a CF C-17 aircraft; the successful deployment of a 'stationary' ice station located on the ever-moving polar ice pack (83° 30'N); and greatly enhanced tracking and communications with the Rangers on patrol. In human terms, perhaps the most important element was the successful 'farthest north' search and rescue operation by the Canadian Forces at 87° N (527 km north of Alert) of a grateful, but frostbitten, Australian adventurer, Tom Smitheringale.

The joint appearance of Danish and Canadian Arctic forces so openly and tangibly co-operating is significant in a region that has been marked by a progressive escalation of international attention. As global warming changes the polar region, the international politics and military calculations made by each of the six polar Arctic nations may need to follow suit. It is our view that the joint operations demonstrated so capably during Nunavut 10 marked something more significant than the de-escalation of past territorial disputes between Canada and Denmark over Hans Island, this being a manageable, perhaps minor, issue in geostrategic terms. Rather, the CF have initiated, and demonstrated, an operational level of cooperation and understanding between NATO allies that may prove to be a fundamental model for accelerated and expanded political cooperation, one that may not be limited only to the Arctic region.

Equally as important, it may provide an enhanced appreciation of, and springboard for, the role and aspirations of Inuit of Nunavut: In short, it may prove to be a means to achieve progressively greater controls over Inuit lands through the devolution of roles and responsibilities historically vested in the south. As Premier Eva Aariak noted in her speech at Alert "I hope interest and investment in sovereignty will translate into other interest and investment in our communities." The military is, of course, doing its part to further both sovereign and community interests through the Canadian Rangers. They embody a unique

Canadian operational partnership forged over decades and represent a crucial backbone to CF operations in the Arctic.

We consider that many Canadians continue to overlook, and under-appreciate, the fundamental role that the Canadian military has had in transforming the north, including Nunavut. It is no coincidence that many communities in Nunavut are co-located with the North Warning Stations, the modernized versions of the Distant Early Warning Line built in the 1950s. But as much as the military has shaped the North, strategist Ken Eyre astutely noted in 1987, “the northern fact has had surprisingly little impact upon the Canadian military.” This seems to be changing. Through operations like Nunavut 10, the CF may be accomplishing much more than a de-escalation of international political tensions in the Arctic. The CF may be pathfinders for better operational relationships and understandings between southern and northern Canadians, as well as expanding the ‘northern dialogue’ among circumpolar nations.

Some commentators continue to confuse the essence of ‘territorial’ claims with maritime boundaries or separate disputes over the transit rights through waters that Canada claims as internal. Given this uncertainty and the attendant ‘polar race’ that Rob Huebert asserts is occurring in the Arctic, the underlying significance of Operation Nunavut 10 may ultimately rest in the nature of the signal that it sends to the world. The CF has convincingly demonstrated that exercising our sovereignty is compatible with good relations with our polar neighbours. Authors, such as Michael Byers, who suggest that such tangible, operational demonstrations of good will are ‘too little too late’ do their audiences a disservice. Our sovereignty is secure, so it is hardly ‘too late.’ And how is the demonstration of Canadian capabilities through the exercises of the Canadian Rangers ‘too little’?

To be certain, as a sovereign nation, Canada needs to maintain and enhance its northern operational capabilities. Indeed, we suggest that this is a long-term, possibly uniquely Canadian, ‘whole-of-government’ project. In so doing, we Canadians have to provide a greater recognition of the aspirations of our celebrated Canadian Rangers, indeed to all the peoples of our North. While past political and academic attentions have been riveted onto the boundary disputes associated with the Beaufort Sea and the rights of passage through the recently re-named “Canadian Northwest Passage”, too often the interests of northern peoples, such as the Nunavummiut, Gwich’in, Dene, and Métis, have been either overlooked or, worse, simply ignored.

In the aftermath of Operation Nunavut 10, media pundit Michael Byers called on Minister MacKay and General Natynczyk to ‘get off their snowmobiles’ and, instead, focus on the settlement of the various, and several unresolved, Arctic claims. These calls for diplomatic action miss the point. International treaties and Canadian sovereignty are enforced, not negotiated, by the Canadian Forces. Such a position also obscures the fact that operational cooperation between respective military forces may, indeed, cement a foundation upon which more material advances, in the fullness of diplomatic time, can be achieved among the circumpolar community. Indeed, we suggest that such pioneering actions by the CF have in fact provided a template for expanded co-operative efforts in the Arctic including, perhaps, expanded diplomatic dialogues and initiatives. Indeed, we suggest that such actions are happening precisely when they may be of material value to the circumpolar parties-at-interest.

More importantly, the CF may have furthered another agenda often overlooked by southern commentators. The Canadian Rangers, residents of remote northern and coastal areas who patrol their own Arctic lands in the sovereign interests of all Canadians, should remind us that sovereignty debates are, at the core, discussions about the future of Nunavummiut and other

Arctic peoples. When current misconceptions about the purported sovereignty “crisis” in the north abate, as they always have in the past, debates about boundaries and rights of passage may be overtaken by re-examinations of proposed international resource developments. Examples include the potential regional effects of major development initiatives, such as planned offshore drilling in Greenland’s waters of Baffin Bay. At this juncture, Canadians may come to appreciate more the landmark achievements of Operation Nunavut 10 and the demonstrated foundations for future operational co-operation between the northern peoples of Canada and Denmark. Sovereignty is partly about boundary lines on a map, but it is quintessentially about what a state does within those boundaries to promote the socio-economic prosperity and political aspirations of its peoples.

Significantly, the work begun by Operation Nunavut 10 culminated in Ottawa in mid-May 2010 with two Chiefs of Defence Staffs, Canadian General Walt Natynczyk and Danish General Knud Bartels, signing a Memorandum of Understanding on Arctic Defence, Security and Operational Cooperation. General Natynczyk noted at the Ottawa signing: “This arrangement will help promote solid defence and security co-operation between our two countries in the Arctic region. Working together to enhance our ability to respond to emergencies through cooperative exercises in the Arctic is key to safety and to strengthening interoperability in the Arctic.”

In the 21st century, defence and diplomacy are compatible, not contradictory: Both are served best by constructive, and realistic, engagement. In the north, this means the furtherance of a meaningful, constructive dialogue with our circumpolar neighbours. Is it not appropriate that such dialogue be advanced in the field, on behalf of all Canadians, by the northerners who make up the Canadian Rangers? It has often been remarked that ‘war is but an extension of diplomacy’. Perhaps the CF operations carried out by the Canadian Rangers represent yet another cultural expression of the Inuit, one where Arctic diplomacy has become ‘but an extension of operational northern forces’ who recognize the vital necessity for cooperation in such a remote and unforgiving environment.

Brig-Gen David Millar, at the conclusion of Operation Nunavut 10, spoke of the ‘unstoppable momentum’ that has characterized the work of the CF in the North. It is our hope during the ‘Year of the Inuit’, designated to mark the tenth anniversary of the settlement of the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement, that this ‘unstoppable momentum’ generated by the CF will also serve to embolden future political, diplomatic and economic development initiatives of mutual benefit to northern and southern Canadians.

Hopefully, these principles for a cooperative operational dialogue embodied by the CF in the ‘changing north’ will continue to be extended to, and reciprocated by, all of Canada’s Arctic neighbours.



Photo: Alert, Nunavut April 26, 2010 Operation Nunaliut 10.
(L-R): Brig-Gen David Millar, Nunavut Premier Eva Aariak and Danish Rear Admiral Henrik Kudsk participate in the ceremonies with the Canadian Rangers and Danish Sirius Arctic patrols.

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