

High Arctic theatre for all audiences

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The Arctic is cast in many roles by many people these days. The beauty of Operation Nanook, the “sovereignty and presence patrolling exercise” currently playing out in the High Arctic, is that all Canadians can and should applaud it.

Some purveyors of polar peril see the Arctic as a region on the precipice of international conflict. Unsettled boundary disputes, dreams of newly accessible resources, legal uncertainties, sovereignty concerns and an alleged Arctic “arms race” point to the “use it or lose it” scenario repeatedly raised by Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his government. A display of Canadian Forces capabilities certainly fits this script. Soldiers from 32 Canadian Brigade Group in Ontario, deployed north as an Arctic Response Company Group, are joined by Canadian Rangers to provide “boots on the ground” in Resolute, Pond Inlet and other Qikiqtani communities. Three naval ships, a dive team, helicopters and transport and patrol aircraft round out this visible demonstration of Canada’s military capabilities.

On the other hand, commentators who emphasize that the circumpolar world is more representative of co-operation than competition can hold up Operation Nanook as an appropriate exercise of Canada’s capabilities. We are exercising our sovereignty by inviting our closest neighbours, the Danes and the Americans, to participate. We are putting aside the well-managed disputes over tiny Hans Island, the oil-rich Beaufort Sea and the Northwest Passage and working with the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard and the Royal Danish Navy to enhance our ability to operate together. After all, why would Canada think it needs to stand alone in the face of common security and safety concerns, such as oil spills or search and rescue?

Senior officials in Foreign Affairs, and the government’s Northern Strategy, released last summer, insist that our sovereignty is not in question. This confidence affords us the space to work with our allies. A military presence in the Arctic is not essential to our sovereignty, but operations like this one allow the Canadian Forces to develop the capabilities necessary to fulfill its domestic mission and operate in all parts of the country. Building awareness of the region also helps generate the domestic support that the federal government needs to implement the Northern Strategy.

Canadians must remember that the Arctic is a homeland. The Inuit of the Qikiqtani region, who have frequently reminded the government that sovereignty begins at home, play an active role in Operation Nanook. They are well represented in the Canadian Rangers: men and women from remote and isolated communities who volunteer as Canadian Forces Reservists in an unorthodox but important unit. In Resolute and Pond Inlet, Rangers are guiding and teaching southern soldiers how to operate in their Arctic homeland. This is a story of grassroots patriotism and of cross-cultural relationship-building.

Operation Nanook does not have the drama of Russian bombers (allegedly) violating Canadian airspace, or the paranoia of rogue ships or submarines undermining our control over internal waters. It is a demonstration of Canada’s well-established sovereignty, and a stage for the Canadian Forces to work with its allies – both internal and international – to ensure the security and safety of Canadians.

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