

Arrival of China in Arctic puts Canada on alert

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OTTAWA — A new Great Game is making a quiet appearance in Canada's Arctic.

In a speech Friday in Beijing, the Danish ambassador to China, Friis Arne Peterson, said the communist country has "natural and legitimate economic and scientific interests in the Arctic," even though it lacks a coastline in the rapidly thawing polar region. He went on to say that his government would like to see China given permanent observer status in the eight-member Arctic Council, which includes Canada, Russia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and the United States. China has applied to become a permanent observer in the forum.

"The Danish government would like to see China as a permanent observer, and I think that others (in the Arctic Council) are likewise willing to do that," the ambassador told a group of journalists.

That assumption is both questionable and problematic, according to scholars and analysts who specialize in Arctic affairs. Some suggest that the Danish ambassador was not only trying to leverage Denmark's influence in the Arctic Council, but soliciting Chinese investment to help the Danes exploit Greenland's natural resources. And from China's perspective, they say, the ambassador's remarks reflect China's interest in gaining access to resources and increasing its geopolitical clout.

"This is what people mean when they talk about the Great Game returning to the Arctic region," says Rob Huebert, a political scientist and the associate director of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary. "What we're seeing here is the changing geopolitical realities in terms of the arrival of China as a much more assertive country in the international system."

"It may be that they (the Danes) feel that getting close to the Chinese would leverage Denmark's position in the Arctic Council," says David Bercuson, a historian at the University of Calgary and senior fellow at the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute. "From the Chinese perspective ... they want to find out for themselves what there is (in terms of potential resource wealth) and they're going to stake a claim because they are not going to let the Canadians and Russians and the Americans divide it up for themselves."

China has become increasingly interested in the Arctic in recent years. With climate change linked to melting ice caps in the Arctic, and with its desperate need for raw materials to maintain its burgeoning economy, the prospect of untapped oil and gas, fishing grounds and new summer shipping lanes has prompted the country's leaders to look at what the Arctic might provide, both in terms of resources and easier access to world markets.

Since 2004, China has had a permanent land-based presence in the Arctic, setting up a research station — Huang He zhan — in the Svalbard Archipelago, which is well inside the Arctic Ocean in the Barents Sea. The facility is supposedly dedicated to oceanic and climatological research. China is also reportedly planning three Arctic research expeditions over the next three to four years, and has announced plans to build a new 8,000-tonne icebreaker by 2013. The ship would be a companion its current vessel, the Xuelong, or Snow Dragon, which already cruises the Arctic region.

These activities may reflect economic and scientific interests, but geostrategic interests aren't forgotten. Li Zhenfu, one of a handful of prominent Chinese academics who have been urging their government to take a greater interest in the Arctic region, points out that a shortened shipping route between East Asia and Europe and North America potentially offers great advantages to China, both economic and military.

“After the Northwest Passage is opened up it will become a new ‘axial sea route’ between Atlantic and Pacific,” Li wrote in a 2009 article published in a journal of the China Association for Science and Technology. “Whoever has control over the Arctic route will control the new passage of world economic and international strategies.” The Arctic, Li concluded, “has significant military value, a fact recognized by other countries.”

Analysts say Canada needs to be aware of China’s ambitions and intentions, whether peaceful or belligerent, and take a hard line against anything that undermines or compromises Canada’s claims to the Arctic.

“The Canadian Arctic has what China wants: natural resources and the possibility of a major new shipping route,” University of Calgary history professor David Wright wrote in a 2010 essay, “The Panda Bear Readies to meet the Polar Bear: China and Canada’s Arctic Sovereignty Challenge.” “While it seems unlikely that China has any ambitions of becoming an armed belligerent in a future war over the Arctic, or of making serious territorial claims in the region, it can be expected that China will become more assertive and opinionated in its commentary on Arctic affairs,” particularly in regard to continental or territorial claims by members of the Arctic Council.

Wright, who is also a research fellow with the CDFAI, points out that Chinese scholars are examining Canada’s claims of historical sovereignty over the Arctic, especially in regard to the Northwest Passage. China, he says, wants the Arctic, with its sea passages, oil and natural gas wealth, minerals and fishing stocks, to be international territory or the “shared heritage of humankind.” Such a view is contrary to Canada’s insistence on its territorial sovereignty of the Arctic islands and the waterways between them.

“Canada needs to be on its guard against Chinese attempts to water down Canada’s Arctic sovereignty and should strengthen co-operation with democratic Arctic states for the security and stability of the region,” says Wright. “Canadian sovereignty over the Northwest Passage is an important bellwether for Canada’s present and future sovereignty and territorial integrity, and should not be up for sale.”

Canada’s assertion of Arctic sovereignty has been a priority for the Conservative government. Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird’s office did not respond Friday night with comments on this matter.

Observers say China needs to be careful in asserting claims to the Arctic Ocean. The notion that the polar waters should be international territory might be turned against its own claims to sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, the Senkaku and Diaoyu Islands and even the island state of Taiwan.

In the end, say analysts, Canada’s best defence is a good offence. Canada, they say, can make use of international law in asserting its claim to the Arctic, but it cannot afford to neglect the need for icebreakers, patrol vessels, satellites and other military hardware. As Bercuson puts it: Military power provides the glint of steel that makes diplomacy work.