

## Tories play to misconceptions on Arctic with jet-thundering photo-op

(feat. DOB HUEBERT)

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OTTAWA - It was a thundering display of Canada's Northern resolve with jet fighters, a frigate and even a submarine, but a recently released poll suggests such exercises in military prowess play to the public's mistaken belief the Arctic is under threat.

When Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Defence Minister Peter MacKay posed for a photo-op on the deck of HMCS Toronto 18 months ago in Frobisher Bay, internal polling told them a majority of Canadians believed the North was in peril — a view not shared by defence officials.

"Three in five Canadians (60 per cent) living north of 60 degrees, and one-half of Canadians (52 per cent) in the south, believe there is a threat to Canada's Arctic sovereignty or to the security of its northern border," says a 2009 Environics survey.

The poll was commissioned by the Defence Department and released under the Access to Information Act after long delays.

But a Defence Department briefing note that same year assured the minister there was no real threat.

"There is no longer a conventional military threat in the Arctic," says the Aug. 11, 2009, briefing note, also obtained by The Canadian Press under the access law.

"The resumption of Russian military exercises in the region is more symbolic of Moscow wanting to be taken seriously as a world power than a return to the armed standoff of the Cold War."

The Environics survey found seven in 10 people worried other countries would challenge Canada's claim in the Arctic and that a military buildup, not diplomacy, was the best way to handle it.

"Increasing military presence receives the most unprompted mentions from Canadians as a way to clearly establish Canada's claim to Arctic territory," said an analysis accompanying the poll.

The poll highlighted the importance of properly mapping the Arctic, but put little faith in continuing international boundary negotiations with other Arctic nations, including the U.S., Russia, Denmark and Norway.

The survey provides a glimpse of how the Conservatives have helped shaped public opinion in the years since Harper first declared Canada must either "use it or lose it" in the Arctic.

The internal survey also provides context to a recent eight-country Arctic poll, commissioned by the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs, that showed Canadians were more bullish than other nations about holding onto their northern border.

"The Conservative party rhetoric in terms of an ongoing threat may indeed be resonating with Canadians," said Rob Huebert, an Arctic expert at the University of Calgary.

"I think what you're seeing is that Canadians are seeing what appears in the press and are coming to the conclusion that there is a threat."

Huebert said the impression could also be reinforced by the attention paid to routine Russian military flights, where the Conservatives have missed few opportunities to rattle the sabre.

The Environics survey also showed the public is confused about what territory belongs to Canadians. Only three in 10 people in southern Canada and one in four northern residents correctly identified the Arctic Ocean as the country's northern limit. Most people picked the Northwest Passage.

The biggest issue facing the Arctic, according to the survey, was climate change and the economy — but the poll showed a divide between north and south. Where people in the North were worried about jobs and housing shortages, those surveyed in the south listed sovereignty and resource rights among the biggest concerns.

The research on the Arctic consisted of a telephone survey of 1,450 people in the south and 450 people in the north. The margin of error for the south was plus or minus 2.6 percentage points. The North was 4.6 percentage points.

MacKay said the Conservative position on the North is not just smoke and mirrors, pointing to the bricks-and-mortar policies of the recently established Arctic warfare training centre, a planned deep-water port and patrol ships.

"Our government is taking the steps necessary to ensure we can face whatever challenges emerge in Canada's Arctic territories for the years and decades to come," MacKay said in an email Monday.

Huebert said the danger of whipping up public sentiment is that it could make it harder for Canadian negotiators to carve out boundaries with other Arctic nations when negotiations begin after 2013.

MacKay's 2009 briefing notes said "co-operation with regional partners will be an important component to ensuring that the DND/CF can operate in the North in a cost-effective and efficient manner."

It says Canada should be talking more with other countries to better co-ordinate activities.