

Wright: Canada must stand up against China's increasing claim to Arctic

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A new and fairly in-depth study of what Chinese academics, government personnel and media commentators are publishing in Chinese about the Arctic and Canada's sovereignty over the Canadian Arctic Archipelago shows that China is now the latest major country to be annoyed with Canada over the Northwest Passage.

There is at present quite a bit of room for discussion and debate in China over this issue, both in the halls of power in Beijing and, to a surprisingly open and public extent, in academic journals and popular news media.

Beijing is still formulating its official Arctic policy, but what non-official observers are writing should worry Canadians.

Acute observers in China know the resources of the Canadian Arctic and its Northwest Passage will continue to guarantee Canada's status as a wealthy and developed country well into the 21st century.

Not all of them are happy about this, given Canada's tiny population and the burgeoning and resource-hungry populations of the world's non-Arctic countries (of which China sees itself as chief). China feels entitled to a share of the Arctic's natural resource wealth and wants to see as much of the Arctic as possible remain international territory.

One particularly vocal Chinese commentator even suggests that China could, under certain circumstances, make its own territorial claims in the Arctic.

Some Chinese analysts want to see Canada's sovereignty over the Northwest Passage watered down or defined into meaninglessness, largely on the Svalbard Islands model.

China and several other major countries that have no Arctic coastline of their own have set up Arctic research stations in the Svalbard Islands, an Arctic archipelago which, supposedly and technically, is controlled by Norway.

But not really.

In 1920 Norway signed an international agreement giving Norway "full and absolute sovereignty" over the Svalbards, but granting the citizens of each signatory state "equal liberty of access and entry for any reason or object whatever."

Hence today, the Chinese and anybody else whose country signed the agreement can pretty much come and go as they like in the Svalbards.

Could, or should, Canadian "sovereignty" over the Northwest Passage suffer a similar fate?

Some Chinese academics seem to think so. If they had their way, Canada would have token "full and absolute sovereignty" over the Northwest Passage, but would be able to do the square root of squat about anything happening there.

This isn't really sovereignty; it's not even suzerainty. For the sake of its own unity and integrity, Canada must never fall for such a trap. China needs to be told, courteously, but firmly, that Canada takes its sovereignty over the Northwest Passage every bit as seriously as China takes its claimed, but undemonstrated, sovereignty over the free and democratic island of Taiwan.

The diplomatic dilemmas and contretemps Beijing faces in the Arctic extend well beyond the region. Openly disputing Canadian sovereignty could be quite problematic for China, given its own disputed claims of what essentially amounts to sovereignty over virtually the entire South China Sea.

To wit: how can China dispute the Taiwan Strait's status as an international waterway and yet insist that the much narrower Northwest Passage is an international waterway?

How can China point to continental shelves as part of its logic for claiming Taiwan territorially and yet remain dubious about the same logic used by Arctic states as justification for their territorial claims?

How can Beijing covet the rich natural resources of the Arctic Ocean, a body of water almost completely enclosed by the national land masses of five Arctic littoral states, as "the common heritage of all humankind" while vociferously denying the same thing about the resources of the South China Sea?

Indeed, how can Jia Yu of China's State Oceanic Administration argue that "the Arctic Ocean is not the backyard of any country or group of countries" while his own country more or less views the much less enclosed South China Sea as its backyard?

Surely the brutally binary argumentum tu quoque optics of Beijing's inconsistent, selective geopolitical logic (as applied in the Arctic Ocean and the South China Sea) are enough to give considerable pause to any gerontocrat in Zhongnanhai even faintly concerned with international PR.

The resultant Arctic policy diffidence of China affords Canada a unique opportunity for diplomatic remonstrance with Beijing. Let us hope, for Canada's sake, that Canadian diplomats are wisely and quietly taking advantage of it.

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