

# **Now, more than ever, Canada needs to take Russia more seriously**

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Postmedia News  
February 7, 2012

Canada and Russia will this year mark 70 years of their bilateral relationship. It has been an eventful history, forged in the days of wartime co-operation with the former Soviet Union and witness to the often tumultuous political evolution of contemporary Russia. There have been ups and downs, from past episodic spying incidents to iconic hockey moments to fruitful scientific co-operation.

Recent media reports linking the arrest of a Canadian naval officer to alleged Russian espionage activities reflect the latest bump on the road. This is what happens when the realities of the intelligence world ooze out of fissures in the usual secrecy. Appropriate action, of course, must always be taken in such circumstances, but, at the same time, strategic decisions about the value and course of the relationship between Canada and Russia must not be taken on the basis of such short-term irritants.

Russia is undergoing political evolution.

The recent and relatively large street demonstrations in Moscow, and smaller ones in other Russian cities, protesting that the parliamentary elections held Dec. 4, 2011, had not been wholly free and fair, have changed the political equation. But an Arab Spring-style revolution they are not. They reflect, principally, the voice of the younger, urban professional class in Russia that has spent the past 10 years focused on and consolidating their economic situation. Now more secure, and with more disposable income, they have turned their attention to civic life, triggered by the complacency of the dominant political class.

The latter failed to recognize the social dynamic that was hidden behind the relative silence and mistook it for acquiescence. The cries on the street are not generally demanding the removal of current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin from the scene, or even to block his probable return to the presidency on March 4, 2012; but rather to serve notice that they do not want to be taken for granted.

The "system" that has served as the architecture of Russian politics since 2000 has run its course, and the first casualty may well be the deal reached between Vladimir Putin and current President Dmitry Medvedev to "swap" jobs for a further 12 years to keep the "system" in place until 2024.

Now, more than ever, Canada needs to take Russia more seriously, and pay more careful political attention to the bilateral relationship at the highest levels.

There are several considerations at this important juncture in the relationship.

First, the warming of the Arctic has injected adrenalin into the politics of being northern neighbours.

It is no longer sufficient to use the imagery of a shared northern experience to underpin the narrative of the bilateral relationship; the two countries are now actually butting against each other in the new Arctic. There will be times when Canada and Russia will be economic competitors in the North, but, more likely, it is of greater advantage to both countries that we maintain a privileged relationship on the issues of mutual interest and concern that will certainly arise. The number of other players with an interest in the new Arctic will increase exponentially in the coming years. A mature and sophisticated capacity to co-operate politically is based on sufficient trust and understanding, which, in turn, requires an investment of time, energy and resources on the part of governments. The time to start that process is now.

Second, the sensitive domestic political situation in Russia requires that Canada be careful about its words and positions. There is no more room for rhetorical political language around Russian military threats to Canada, as occurred earlier in the Stephen Harper period. The government of Canada must keep a careful and restrained watch on political developments in Russia, allowing Russians to know that it cares, but is very respectful of the fact that their own future is rightly in their hands.

Third, the relationship between the United States and Russia remains strained and marked by suspicion and mistrust, partly inherited and partly sowed anew. There is an opportunity for Canada to become the North American partner that Russia needs to diversify its reliance and focus on Europe, and in a way that does not threaten the United States.

As the Arctic warms and Russian politics has grown interesting again, never has the need been greater for Canada to improve its relationship with Russia. This would help manage the politics of the Arctic, which will be one of the key trends in international affairs in coming years, more effectively, as well as offer Canadian business enhanced opportunities in Russia itself.

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