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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Last year, Canadian academics Rob Huebert and Adam Lajeunesse [warned](#) that the [next sovereignty crisis](#) was looming between the United States and Canada over the Northwest Passage. For decades, the two countries have agreed to disagree about the legal status of the Passage, with the U.S. viewing it as an international strait (with attendant freedom of navigation rights) and Canada arguing that it is historic, internal waters subject to full Canadian sovereignty and control. Despite their different legal views, the countries continue to co-operate closely in the region – a working arrangement enshrined in the 1988 [Arctic Co-operation Agreement](#) governing U.S. icebreaker transits, while maintaining an “agreement to disagree” on the legal status of the waters. Remarks last year by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that Canada’s claim to the Passage is “illegitimate” and U.S. Navy Secretary Richard Spencer’s comments that Washington might send a ship through the Passage as part of a [freedom of navigation operation \(FONOP\)](#) inspired predictions that the two countries were on a “[collision course](#)” and that their long-standing special relationship was on thin ice.

To overreact to the American position on the legal status of the Northwest Passage is a long-held Canadian tradition. In the end, nothing happened. The only American naval vessels operating in and around the Northwest Passage in 2020 have been [invited](#) by Canada to participate in Operation NANOOK-TUUGAALIK – Canada’s premier northern military exercise aimed at improving its operating capabilities in the Arctic (and exercising its sovereignty). Vice-Admiral Andrew Lewis, commander of U.S. 2nd Fleet, [noted](#) that American participation in the Canadian exercise aims at fostering “regional cooperation on shared challenges, and ensuring a stable, conflict-free Arctic”. In June, the United States Coast Guard quietly [announced](#) a plan to send the USCGC *Healy* (one of its two operational icebreakers) through the Northwest Passage in the summer of 2021 – its first transit of the route since 2003 – to work with “our allies and partners on the mutual goal of ensuring a safe, secure, and cooperative Arctic.” It is not a freedom-of-navigation cruise. This messaging matches with the Coast Guard’s [Arctic Strategic Outlook](#), which calls co-operation and co-ordination with various Canadian agencies “vital to the safety and security of the Arctic”.

In short, the U.S. is sending clear signals that it wishes to continue the long history of co-operation and partnership with Canada in the Arctic. Its ability to co-operate may expand dramatically, as it is set to [begin](#) construction of the Coast Guard’s first heavy polar security cutter, and with funding for a second in the proposed fiscal year 2021 budget. On June 9, President Donald Trump released a [memorandum](#) asking for a review to “identify the optimal number and type of polar security icebreakers” required to “protect ... national interests” and to “retain a strong Arctic security presence”. In his [remarks](#) to SOUTHCOM on July 10, 2020, the president stated that his administration was working to secure an additional 10 icebreakers. The reinvigoration of the American icebreaker fleet coincides with Canada’s [efforts](#) to construct new icebreakers for the Canadian Coast Guard and [Arctic and offshore patrol vessels](#) for the Royal Canadian Navy. Both countries should view this capacity building as an opportunity for greater bilateral engagement – icebreaker operations have long been the bedrock of their Arctic co-operation.



In the summer of 1987, the 40-year-old American icebreaker *Northwind* experienced engineering problems while tasked to escort resupply vessels to the U.S. airbase at Thule, Greenland. With the vessel unable to operate and icebreaking services required, the resupply of the vital base hung in the balance. Coast Guard commandant Admiral Paul Yost later explained to Congress: “thank goodness we have a friendly neighbor to the North, the Canadians – I asked the head of the Canadian Coast Guard as a personal favor to the Commandant of the Coast Guard if he would break that out for me, and on a handshake we did it.”¹ The Canadian icebreaker *Pierre Radisson* successfully supported the resupply of Thule that year. When one congressman argued that it was an “embarrassment” that the U.S. had to rely on Canada, Rep. Thomas Carper disagreed and suggested that the two countries should continue to “share those [icebreaking] resources”.² The next year, USCGC *Polar Star* assisted *Radisson* and another Canadian vessel after they were caught in the ice off Point Barrow, Alaska – even though this support disrupted its schedule.

This kind of close co-operation, based on handshakes and last-minute requests, has characterized U.S.-Canada icebreaker operations since the Second World War. Icebreakers from the two countries have rescued one another, worked together to resupply northern bases and conducted Arctic research. In 1994, Canadian and American icebreakers supported one another on their voyage to the North Pole – the first North American surface vessels to do so. For almost a [decade](#), *Healy* worked with Canadian icebreakers to conduct research needed to de-mark the extended continental shelf in the Beaufort Sea. A Canadian icebreaker now supports the resupply of Thule every summer as part of [Operation Pacer Goose](#).

Revitalizing their icebreaker fleets means the two countries will be in a strong position to expand upon this long co-operative tradition. Both countries should [continue](#) to share best practices and lessons learned to ensure that they launch leading-edge vessels. Infrastructure developments to support Arctic icebreaker operations should be discussed bi-laterally to ensure efficiency of effort. The ability to perform unexpected tasks on a handshake requires clear, positive and consistent communications and close interoperability, which depend on joint training and exercises. With recapitalized fleets, the Canadian and U.S. coast guards can deepen co-operation on emergency preparedness, search-and-rescue missions, mass rescue operations, oil-spill response and other disaster management activities (including community evacuations). Moving forward, the two countries should closely co-ordinate where vessels are located and when, providing maximum coverage and domain awareness in the North American Arctic. Increased national icebreaking capacity and expanded bi-lateral co-operation will support a safer and more secure Arctic – a priority for both countries in light of the broader [North American defence modernization agenda](#) currently underway.

Regardless of the practical co-operation that occurs, the expansion of American polar capabilities is likely to upset Canadian sensitivities about the Northwest Passage. In justifying the expense to build polar security cutters, Maria Cantwell, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Committee on

¹ Coast Guard commandant Admiral Paul Yost, hearings before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Navigation of the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, House of Representatives, One Hundredth Congress, Second Session, February 18, 1988.

² Hearings before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Navigation of the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, House of Representatives, One Hundredth Congress, First Session, on Polar Icebreaker Policy and Missions, July 29 and August 4, 1987, pp. 24-25.



Commerce, Science and Transportation, explained that, “I think this is a giant step forward in recognizing that we are an Arctic nation and we plan to participate in the Northwest Passage” – not challenge or disrupt Canada’s claim, not conduct FONOPs, but *participate*. The groundwork for that participation was laid in the 1988 Arctic Co-operation Agreement. In this light, *Healy*’s voyage next summer represents an opportunity for the U.S. to participate in joint activities in the Passage and ensure that, in case of an emergency, its icebreakers can work seamlessly with their Canadian counterparts in a region of growing geostrategic importance.

It is the handshake, not nationalistic arm wrestling over the legal status of the Northwest Passage, which best captures the essence of Canadian-American Arctic relations: the two countries are [premier partners](#) in the region. Improved icebreaking capabilities and a willingness to share those resources open ample room for this relationship to grow.

► About the Author

Dr. Peter Kikkert is the Irving Shipbuilding Chair in Arctic Policy in the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government and Assistant Professor in the Public Policy and Governance program at St. Francis Xavier University. His research focuses on safety, security, and sovereignty issues in the polar regions. He has written extensively on the historic and contemporary role of the Canadian Armed Forces in the North, search and rescue and emergency management in the region, Canada-U.S. relations, and on the evolution of international law the Arctic and Antarctic.

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► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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