

Russia's Arctic policy no cause for alarm, MacKay told

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There's a lot of hot air and hype over Russia's Arctic posture, but the old adversary's northern policy interests are almost the same as those of Canada, a briefing note prepared for Defence Minister Peter MacKay says.

The document, which examined a 2008 Russian Security Council policy statement, paints a startling contrast to the steady drumbeat of complaints from the Conservative government over repeated probing of Canadian airspace by long-range bombers.

The latest challenge happened Tuesday and two Canadian CF-18 jet fighters were scrambled to shadow a pair of Cold War-era TU-95 Bear strategic bombers over the Beaufort Sea. It occurred while Prime Minister Stephen Harper was in the middle of a five-day visit to the North.

The Russian policy report was "silent" on those type of incursions, but Canadian defence analysts concluded that, overall, Russia's stated intentions do not "raise concerns from a Canadian defence perspective."

They noted that what the Russians put on paper was remarkably similar to Canada's own northern strategy.

"While media reports have portrayed the policy as aggressive and inflammatory, the document is quite moderate in tone and makes it clear that Russia will pursue its interests in the Arctic in accordance with international law and in a co-operative manner," said a May 13, 2009 briefing note for Mr. MacKay.

"There is nothing in this Arctic policy that is cause for alarm."

The analysis said Russia's No. 1 goal in the region is socio-economic development, followed by military security. But the briefing note downplayed that aspect and says additional troops are "primarily border guards" and there was an intent to establish a "functional coast guard system" in the North.

The incident Tuesday, where the bombers flew within 30 nautical miles of the border, immediately gave Tories more ammunition to sell their plan to buy high-tech stealth fighters, just as a Commons committee was meeting to decide when to hold hearings into the \$16-billion purchase.

Mr. MacKay announced earlier this summer that Canada would proceed with the purchase of Lockheed Martin's F-35 Lightning II multi-role fighter.

"It is the best plane our government could provide our forces, and when you are a pilot staring down Russian long-range bombers, that's an important fact to remember," said Dimitri Soudas, the prime minister's communications director.

The Opposition Liberals dismissed Tuesday's incident as more posturing that won't help Ottawa's new policy of diplomacy with Arctic neighbours, which was outlined last week by Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon.

“When it suits the Conservative purposes, they pick on — or bring forward — something Russia has done routinely and they make a big case out of it,” said Liberal MP Larry Bagnell, the party's Arctic critic.

“The Russian flights have been going for a long time and all of sudden, one day when they need a diversion, the prime minister and the minister of defence created a caustic, international relations uproar.”

An Arctic defence expert said he believed the flight by the TU-95s was timed to get catch the allies' attention because Canadian, American and Danish troops are for the first time taking part in a joint northern exercise — Operation Nanook 10 — on Canadian soil.

Rob Huebert, of the University of Calgary's Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, said the Russians also released a second military policy paper at the same time the Arctic strategy was laid out.

It detailed the kind of combat forces the Kremlin envisions deploying to protect their sovereignty and that is what's likely worrying the Conservative government, he said.

Mr. Huebert said all of the Arctic nations, including Canada, have been “talking out both sides of their mouths.” They preach diplomacy and co-operation the way Cannon did with last week, but at the same time make plans to build up military forces.

The Americans recently made a pitch for closer defence ties with the Norwegians, including Arctic training with advanced air-to-surface missiles.

“They are talking co-operation, they're truly hoping for co-operation and they're just building up this capability because they don't know what the future is going to look like and it's prudent planning,” Mr. Huebert said. “My retort is that it's very expensive prudent planning.” Canada, on the other hand, seems to be going a different route. In a major update on its own plans involving the Arctic, the Canadian government touted its plans for economic development (which is certainly needed, as a quick visit to North of 60 shows) and set up a website listing all of its commitments and activities in the Arctic. But rather than aim for conflict, Canada appears to be most encouraged by international co-operative efforts to map the floor of the Arctic Ocean in order to divvy up jurisdiction and to maintain the peace. Perhaps this is not surprising for the nation that invented peace keeping during the 1957 Suez Crisis. Whether or not it will work, though, is another matter.

Either way, it's clear that a new, err, Cold War is developing around the Arctic Ocean as interested nations (and by-standers such as Sweden and the entire EU) jockey for position around the ocean. Most likely the sabre-rattling is intended for domestic consumption, whilst the real work continues to be carried out in international co-operation amongst the Arctic nations.