

Tory spin hurting relations with Russia: Liberals

CTV NEWS (featuring COLIN ROBERTSON)

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The Conservative government's continued posturing towards routine Russian flights near Canadian airspace is not helping Arctic diplomacy, the opposition charges.

"The Russian flights have been going on for a long time and then all of a sudden on a day when they needed a diversion, the prime minister and the minister of defence created a caustic international relations uproar by chastising the Russians," Liberal MP Larry Bagnell, the party's Arctic critic, told reporters Wednesday.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's director of communications, Dimitri Soudas, sent out a late night email to reporters saying two CF-18 fighter jets shadowed a pair of Russian military aircraft that flew as close as 55 kilometres outside Canada's northern borders.

"On 24 August, two CF-18 Hornet fighter aircraft were launched and visually identified (two) Russian aircraft, the TU-95 Bear, approximately 120 nautical miles (216 kilometres) north of Inuvik, Northwest Territories. At their closest point, the Russian aircraft were 30 nautical miles (55 kilometres) from Canadian soil. The CF-18s shadowed the Bear aircraft until they turned around," Soudas said in the email.

But the Liberals say the Russian flights are routine and the Conservatives are playing domestic politics at the expense of international diplomacy.

"How are we going to work with a country we have just chastised for not even coming into our airspace?" Bagnell said.

The Conservatives have been bullish on defending Canada's Arctic sovereignty during their time in office and are selling the public on their controversial \$16-billion purchase of 65 new F-35 Lightning II stealth fighters.

Harper, who is in the Canadian north for his annual Arctic tour, used the incident to plug the new fighters.

Critics have said the Harper government has not been able explain why they specifically need the F-35, which was a sole-sourced contract.

About 12 to 18 Russian military flights occur near Canada's airspace a year without incident.

Former Canadian diplomat Colin Robertson said the Russian aircraft flown in Tuesday's exercise date back to the 1950s, and while they are designed to carry bombs, they are not particularly powerful and are easily intercepted by CF-18s.

By design, the exercises are "simply probing" sorties that Russia stepped up in 2007, Robertson said.

"The important thing to remember is we're at peace and in fact we're collaborating with the Russians," Robertson told CTV News Channel.

"But it does underline, as the prime minister's visit does...the North is part of Canada and we're determined to exercise our sovereignty there and that does mean we're going to have to put some investment on the Forces side."

According to Robertson, these kinds of incidents are unlikely to compromise diplomatic relations with Russia, or other nations that seek to lay claim to the Arctic.

"This is likely not going to be an impediment to what would be really important, and that is the idea of us sitting down with the Arctic Council to try and set out the really serious problems, (including) passes through the Northern Channel -- whether you're taking the Russian route or the Canadian route -- resources and boundaries, and how we exercise that sovereignty against real threats, which could be for example terrorists."

In late July, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said two CF-18s were scrambled to intercept two Russian military planes 463 kilometres east of Goose Bay Labrador.

"This was a message, clearly, to them that we will have CF-18 fighter planes there to greet them every time," he told CTV News Channel at the time.

Russian policy similar to Canada's

Russian officials at the time expressed confusion to The Globe and Mail, saying their planes never entered Canada's airspace and were conducting routine training.

According to a briefing document prepared for MacKay based on a 2008 Russian Security Council policy statement, Russia's policy in the Arctic is similar to Canada's.

"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 the May 13, 2009 briefing note, which was obtained by The Canadian Press.

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

While the Russian policy statement did not address flyovers such as Tuesday's, the briefing document concluded that Russia's intentions in the Arctic do not "raise concerns from a Canadian defence perspective."

Russia was intent on socio-economic development in the North as well as military security. However, the Russians appear to be focused primarily on border guards, the briefing document says, as well as a "functional coast guard system" in the region.