# The Cold War in the Arctic

JOHN MATTHEW BARLOW (featuring ROB HUEBERT)

Current Intelligence
July 29, 2010

In 1949, the Soviet Union parachuted two scientists, Vitali Volovich and Andrei Medvedev, onto the surface of the North Pole in a bit of Cold War one-upsmanship with Canada. Next spring, Russia plans to celebrate a belated 60th anniversary of the event by conducting a paratroop drop at the North Pole.

The entire Arctic region is tense these days with competing national claims to the seabed (full of oil) and the fate of the waters within the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, the fabled Northwest Passage. Should the waters of the passage melt, a new shipping route will be opened up, one that is cheaper and faster, in terms of the North American and East Asian markets, than the Panama Canal. The question of who owns the waters, then, becomes crucial. Canada claims that it is the rightful owner of the passage, arguing that it is inland water, contained within the Archipelago. The rest of the world, including Canada's closest friend and ally on the world stage, the United States, believes otherwise: the passage is international waters.

In 2007, Russia stoked the tensions surrounding the Arctic by planting its flag on the North Pole seabed. The North Pole itself, of course, is in international waters, nonetheless, the other Arctic nations (Canada, the United States, Denmark, and Norway) were none too pleased. And of course, earlier this year, a Russian fighter jet was intercepted by the Canadian Air Force near Canadian air space in the Arctic.

In realpolitikterms, it isn't hard to see Russia's attempts to land paratroopers on the North Pole as provocative, as all the Arctic nations seek to solidify their claims to the Arctic Ocean and the seabed for national security and oil reasons. Rob Huebert, an Arctic specialist at the University of Calgary, connects the dots between the 2007 flag-planting and the planned paratroop drop and suggests that we consider

> *the political symbolism and the military capabilities that that shows -- it's clear the Russians are very much increasing their assertiveness, and I'd say starting to border on aggressiveness, in terms of their intent to show their ability to have control of the Arctic region.*

Indeed, the leader of the 2007 flag-planting expedition, Artur Chilingarov, is slated to be involved in the paratrooper mission, which, for Huebert, only emphasises Russian acknowledgement of the strategic implications.

That being said, however, it isn't as if Russia is acting alone in the Arctic. Recently, Denmark (which maintains control over Greenland) has revealed plans to increase its presence in the Arctic. This comes on the heels of Norway's purchase of fighter jets for Arctic surveillance, as well as military training exercises in the Arctic. This has led Franklyn Griffiths of the University of Toronto to wonder about the military consequences of all of this sabre-rattling in the Arctic.

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.