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NEW DIMENSIONS IN CANADIAN-SOVIET ARCTIC RELATIONS

by John Hannigan

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades the Canadian Arctic has witnessed dramatic changes. With the exceptions of defence and sovereignty, the issues arising from these changes have been addressed almost exclusively from a domestic standpoint. More recently, however, there is an emerging trend to view the North in an international context. In general, a mature society assesses its political, economic and social developments in global terms, inviting the forging of international links. The Arctic is no exception. While still in the incipient stages, Canada's northern relations with other Arctic-rim countries have been quietly expanding.

The two countries which figure most prominently in Arctic affairs are Canada and the Soviet Union. Together they comprise about 80 percent of the land mass of the Arctic. The strategic implications of this are well known. It is now time to explore more closely the political, economic and social consequences of this geographic fact. From what has been a traditional focus on the military importance of the Arctic, with decisions and policies flowing from the perceived need to protect ourselves against the Soviet Union, the Arctic is now becoming a centre of attention for cooperation between the two countries. This presents a new set of issues for international peace and security.

The importance of international cooperation in the Arctic has been noted by both countries. On the Canadian side, this was made clear in the December 1986 Response of the Government of Canada to the Report of the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on Canada's International Relations, which stated the government's concurrence with recommendations that called for the development of a northern dimension for Canadian foreign policy, and its commitment to "explore ways of

expanding our bilateral and multilateral relations with all northern states in areas of mutual interest . . ."¹ Similarly, the Soviet Union has called for an increased dialogue on Arctic issues. In October 1987, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev listed six proposals for international cooperation, two in the area of military issues but the remainder dealing with economic, scientific and environmental cooperation.²

With these expressions of interest, the groundwork is being laid for new and expanded Arctic relations between Canada and the USSR. How are the Canadian government's intentions being translated into programmes? To what extent are programmes with the Soviet Union determining the overall northern dimension of Canadian foreign policy? What might be the effect on East-West relations generally and on our relations with the United States? Will activities be significant enough to lead to confidence-building measures in this strategically important region? This paper will address these questions, but it is important to first review the history of Arctic relations between the two countries.

THE HISTORY OF CANADIAN-SOVIET ARCTIC COOPERATION

While Canadian-Soviet Arctic cooperation at the governmental level is a recent development, the history of discussions on this subject can be traced back to the 1950s. Emerging from the iciest years of the Cold War, East-West relations moved into the mid-1950s with the Spirit of Geneva and the beginning of the Soviet domestic "thaw" under Nikita Khrushchev. At this time, Canadian foreign policy turned toward the guarded possibility of detente with the USSR. Bilateral discussions were held in 1955-56 covering a number of issues. A few months after the October 1955 visit to the Soviet