



Every Canadian international maritime boundary in the North is disputed, or open to challenge. Canada has only marginal capability to challenge aerial “incursions” and no capability to even know of submerged ones. Yet if the sense of national, as opposed to just

Northern outrage over real or imagined challenges to Canadian “sovereignty” — remember the Polar Sea — are anything to go by, nothing Northern matters more to Canadians than the “threat” posed by our closest ally’s icebreaker ploughing through our Northwest Passage.

The spat with Spain made all Canadians, not just beleaguered cod fishers, into stakeholders on the issues of fisheries conservation. It may be a lesson usefully applied in the North. A broad sense of outrage over trespass on “our” Arctic may not be the cornerstone for a “Circumpolar” foreign policy as envisaged by its most ardent adherents, but it remains a likely Canadian sentiment for some time to come. The challenge may be to yoke that proprietorial sense to a larger purpose.

While no one is likely to oppose the ideal of a demilitarized Arctic, where disputed boundaries matter naught, because the old rivalries and rigidities have been melted away by cozy, constructive, co-operation, it may be premature to abandon the primacy of sovereignty and security as elements of foreign policy.

Soviet and U.S. nuclear submarines may no longer be playing cat and mouse beneath the ice in Canadian waters. But if they are, Canadians don’t know. And if the Canadian government knows (because as senior defence officials like to hint, “the Americans tell us,”) ordinary Canadians don’t know because Ottawa is obliged to keep secret whatever the Americans say about their nuclear submarine operations.

The purchase of four, nearly-new British submarines won’t help much, because they will have no serious under-ice capability, although they will oblige the Americans to keep sharing some secrets, if only so their Arctic-bound subs don’t bump into Canadian ones prowling the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Some would argue that it is better not to know, for in the absence of being able to do anything, save protest, being known to know might actually undermine Canadian claims.

Yet the issue of knowing what’s going on in “our” Arctic and beyond, in the Polar Basin, isn’t just about sovereignty — old-fashioned or otherwise. Whether it is tourist-toting icebreakers, submarine tankers, marine mammal migrations, airborne toxins or just the pursuit of science, monitoring the Arctic seems a prerequisite for formulating policy. What is equally clear is that “knowing” is hugely expensive.

Consider this paradox. Perhaps the single most valuable contributor to the base of knowledge about the subsurface Arctic Basin today is a nuclear-powered U.S. Navy hunter-killer submarine, which has been dedicated to research by Washington as part of a four-year program.

If Canada is to have a “Circumpolar” dimension to its foreign policy, would we oppose such operations because the vessel is nuclear-powered or because it is a naval vessel. Or support them because it furthers science or because the sub belongs to our closest friends and ally. And would our stance change if we knew that research was being conducted in our waters. Or being done by a Russian submarine. Or would it be okay for anybody’s submarine to operate anywhere under the ice as long as the fruits of the research were shared. And how would we know.