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Arctic Security and Sovereignty through a Media Lens: A Study by Mathieu Landriault

Praneel K. Gayan
NAADSN Graduate Fellow

Purpose

This policy brief summarizes, for the policy community, a chapter by Dr. Mathieu Landriault on the media's treatment of Arctic sovereignty and security entitled, "Arctic Security and Sovereignty through a Media Lens: From a Pile of Frozen Rocks to the Bottom of the Sea."¹

Background

Sovereignty and security are two important concepts in defence and international affairs. Sovereignty is about ensuring the security of a geographic space through military presence and human occupation. In contrast, security can be conceptualized as the preservation of economic development and environmental stewardship within that space. When applied to the Arctic, however, both constructs can be differently understood by the various political, social, and economic actors with interests in the region.

To understand representations of Arctic sovereignty and security, scholarly observers have mainly studied those of national governments. They have however drawn their attention more recently to non-governmental actors, providing insights on the

perspectives of Indigenous peoples and in particular the Inuit, as well as non-governmental organizations like Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund. In his research, Landriault focuses on another important non-governmental actor – the media (62).

According to Landriault, the Canadian media convey certain ideas and imagery about the Arctic that affect society's demand for the defence of the region (62). Importantly, by influencing the public, the media are able to guide the federal government's behaviour. Although the dominant media discourse proposes that states' interests in the Arctic are rising and that strong international competition for the region is a future certainty, to some academics these views are not only alarmist but also informed by outdated thinking.

To determine whether this perceived alarmism is justified, Landriault analyzes pieces by opinion-page contributors who play an instrumental role in shaping popular understandings of Arctic issues and in orienting action by the federal government (63). Indeed, as former bureaucrats, leaders of non-governmental organizations, and editorial writers, they interpret foreign actors' intentions and particular events, but also issue recommendations.

In his study, Landriault examines opinion texts from 25 newspapers, published in reaction to three sovereignty and security crises that erupted in the Canadian Arctic between July 2005 and August 2007 (63).

Three Incidents: Hans Island, the *USS Charlotte*, and a Russian Polar Expedition

Hans Island is a small Arctic territory whose sovereignty is disputed. While Denmark had conducted military reconnaissance of the island in the preceding years, in July 2005 the Canadian flag was planted on it and the Canadian Minister of National Defence later patrolled the island aboard a helicopter. Responding to Canada's claim of sovereignty, Denmark sent a frigate to Hans Island in August, but without its crew disembarking. Both countries eventually agreed to negotiate to resolve the situation.

In December 2005, just a few months after the Hans Island incident, news broke of the United States submarine *USS Charlotte* having surfaced at the North Pole the month before. By this time, the submarine had already reached America. Because the boat's return route had likely passed through Canadian waters, the event turned into a sovereignty and security incident. It also became a political issue during the Canadian federal election campaign.

In August 2007, a Russian expedition dropped a Russian flag on the seabed of the North Pole during a mission to collect sediments from the pole's ocean floor. The mission's objective was to gather data to build the case that the continental shelf under the Arctic Ocean was in fact an extension of Russian territory, which would have had sovereignty implications.

Threats Exaggerated

Landriault observes both similarities and contrasting reactions in the media's responses to the three incidents (70, 75-76). In the case of Hans Island, there was a tendency to minimize the significance of the island and of the incident itself, as sarcasm and figurative language were used to characterize both. More importantly, the contributors framed the incident as foreshadowing direct challenges to Canadian sovereignty and security in the context of impending global changes and competition between states.

The strategic considerations of climate change, for instance, were at the centre of many texts. For the authors, climate change is opening new waterways to maritime activity, is improving access to natural resources and other economic opportunities, and will as a result increase interest and rivalry in the Arctic. Illustrating this notion of competition, Landriault notes that the contributors extrapolated from Denmark's assertiveness over Hans Island to identify several countries that in their opinion were already undermining Canadian Arctic sovereignty, including the United States (66).

Another important remark by Landriault is that the media blamed Canada for the absence of a strong Arctic policy, which they proposed would lead to increasingly large losses of Arctic territory and interests (i.e., the domino theory) (66). It was implied that Canada needed to respond strongly to perceived challenges to its Arctic sovereignty, as insignificant as they may seem, because diplomatic means were seen as inadequate. As such, the media viewed Canada's actions on Hans Island as necessary signals, to Denmark and indirectly to the United States, of a willingness and a capability to defend Arctic interests. To reinforce Canada's Arctic claim,

many experts recommended larger and sustained investments in the region, especially in the military and in technology, and to a lesser extent advocated for enhancing scientific and socioeconomic outcomes in Canada's North.

Like in the Hans Island incident, some commentators constructed the American submarine's passage as a warning of impending losses of significant territory and resources in the context of international competition. Reactions were also similar in that other authors used the event to expand their threat assessments which this time however included non-state Arctic threats (e.g., terrorism and environmental crises).

Unlike the reactions to the Hans Island incident, however, in the USS *Charlotte* case the contributors did not advocate for direct demonstrations of Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic, even though there was direct involvement of the United States in the incident. Instead, the media downplayed the United States' threat potential to Canadian Arctic sovereignty. The American incursion was seen simply as a manifestation of the enduring dispute over the Northwest Passage between Canada and the United States.

Considering the noted differences in their treatments of the Hans Island and USS *Charlotte* incidents, the media were surprisingly consistent in their recommendations. The suggestions included stronger Canadian presence, surveillance, and control capabilities in the Arctic, as Landriault argues (75).

Moreover, and despite a different framing of the Hans Island incident and of the American incursion, for Landriault the coverage of the events undoubtedly contributed to Arctic sovereignty gaining prominence among the political community at that time (69-70, 75). Indeed, a few days after the

American submarine incursion was reported, the then-campaigning Conservative Party, which was later victorious, announced new military investments for the region. As could be expected, the media were largely supportive of the plan.

Regarding the third incident, Russia's action received more media coverage than the other two, but once again some ideas recurred. Although the event was described as a spectacle of symbolic meaning, Landriault notes that the Russian mission was viewed as signalling a scramble to own or control the natural resources and other economic opportunities in the Arctic (72). The media even associated notions of European colonialism in Africa and America with their forecast. Importantly, the predicted scramble was presumed to involve Canada and Russia, but other powers too, like the United States. Landriault finds that Cold War-era thinking was being revived (73). Russia for instance was described in some texts as an outright aggressor, ready for a struggle to expand its Arctic sovereignty. Canada was warned to prepare for conflict or otherwise lose its seat at the table. Although understated, a militaristic approach was being promoted.

A small minority of contributors, however, disputed the assessments that Russia was being overly assertive and a threat to Canada. For them, a mutual understanding between the two countries and avoiding military confrontation were paramount.

Conclusion

Landriault's analysis indicates that the media were indeed alarmist (75). All three incidents were constructed as crises that preceded looming threats to Arctic Canada. Oversimplifications (e.g., the domino theory) and extrapolations allowed the media to exaggerate the urgency for Canada to assert its Arctic sovereignty, and to rely primarily on

military means to this end. Regarding Hans Island for instance, the media demanded an overt response aimed indirectly at the United States, which was not directly implicated in the incident. In contrast, simply increasing Canada's Arctic presence was the recommendation that followed the USS *Charlotte* incident in which the United States was directly involved. By the time the crisis erupted, its triggering event (i.e., the submarine intrusion) was already over, unlike in the case of Hans Island. This contextual difference explains why the media's proposed actions and measures after the American intrusion focused on advancing Arctic sovereignty

and security generally, rather than on addressing other states' behaviours. More than a decade after the flag-dropping incident, however, the Arctic struggle – let alone battle – has not materialized to the extent envisaged by the authors. Landriault therefore recommends that the media should take care to avoid oversimplifications, which can lead to exaggerated threat assessments and corresponding presumptions of consequences for sovereignty (76). This is also a word of caution to policy makers that threat assessments, which entail some level of subjectivity, may be less reliable when they are published in the media.

¹ Mathieu Landriault, "Arctic Security and Sovereignty through a Media Lens: From a Pile of Frozen Rocks to the Bottom of the Sea," in *Breaking Through: Understanding Sovereignty and Security in the Circumpolar Arctic*, eds. Wilfrid Greaves and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 62-79.