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The Underpants Gnomes of Arctic Sovereignty

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This week the *National Post* published a sweeping [editorial on Canadian Arctic sovereignty](#). Warning of the growing threats from great power competitors and the fragile state of our northern defences, the *Post*'s editorial board painted a grim picture of Canada's ability to keep the North both strong and free. Russia is building a powerful icebreaker fleet and renovating its Arctic bases; China, meanwhile, has labelled itself a 'Near-Arctic State.' From this, the *Post* extrapolates considerable danger. It is superficially threatening to be sure.

This may instill fits of polar peril in some, but to this scholar it brings to mind tiny cartoon characters: the Underpants Gnomes, from that irreverent cartoon *South Park*. Notorious thieves who steal underpants in the night, these creatures were asked why they do it. Step one is stealing underpants they declare. Step three: profit! When pressed to elaborate on step two, they draw a blank.

The *National Post* has offered us Underpants Gnome logic. Step one, they declare is an expanding Russian icebreaker fleet or growing Chinese Arctic interests; step three is a loss of Canadian sovereignty. Step one is more Canadian military capacity; step three is more sovereignty. Like their gnomish counterparts, there is a gaping hole in the argument. I would challenge the *Post* to fill in the blanks and answer the obvious question: what is step two?

The notion that growing Russian power in the Arctic naturally threatens to strip Canada of its "status as a northern power" or may lead to us "ceding great swaths of territory to hostile and autocratic regimes" is a big prediction not even remotely explained. Precisely which territories will Russia conquer? How and why would Russia invade a NATO power to steal Arctic territory thousands of kilometres from its own coast? The *Post* is correct that Russia has a growing icebreaker fleet, but how is this a threat to Canada? These ships are slow and unarmed. They are not designed nor suited for any offensive operations. If Russia would like to use them to deploy soldiers to Ellesmere Island, I suspect that Canada would be inconvenienced by – as former chief of the defence staff General Walter Natynczyk once quipped – having to go and rescue them.

Russia has also expanded its military bases across northern Siberia. "In the past 16 years, Russia has refurbished 13 Soviet-era Arctic bases and numerous other smaller ports" warns the *National Post*.

Again, this is taken as a threat without question. Why? Across these bases, Russia has deployed an array of anti-air and air-defence missile systems like the high-end S-400 and Bastion systems. None of these can reach Canada and, even if they could, how does that invalidate Canadian sovereignty? NATO has weapons that can reach Russia, and yet Russia retains its sovereignty. Russia's militarization of the Arctic is not a threat; it is evidence of Moscow's own insecurity in the region. And, if the Russian military chooses to send critical weapons systems to Siberia, NATO should applaud that. Better there than in Kaliningrad or Ukraine.

China is, likewise, held up as a threat to Canadian sovereignty. That country certainly has shown a greater interest in the North over the past ten years and has been expanding its capabilities. Despite this, declaring China a threat requires elaborating on connections that the *Post* leaves implied. In recent years Chinese companies have been steadily losing favour across the circumpolar North. Confucius Institutes are closing, strategic investment reviews are being strengthened, and China's soft power has been crumbling in the face of its human rights violations and "wolf warrior" diplomacy. Missing from the *Post's* logic is that crucial step which explains where exactly that threat is going to come from.

The *Post* also laments that Canada has failed to "beef up its Arctic naval fleet in order to project power in the North." We must buttress Arctic combat capability, says the editorial board, so that the Canadian Armed Forces have the "resources it needs to defend our sovereignty in the Far North." Step one combat power, step three sovereignty.

The question of sovereignty in the Canadian Arctic relates to the legal status of the Northwest Passage and differing interpretations of international law; Canada calls the waters of the Arctic Archipelago internal while the US believes that an international strait runs through the region. Canada's diplomats and military leaders have known for generations that no amount of combat power will fundamentally shift that legal dispute. The notion that more defence capability magically translates into sovereignty cries out for elaboration.

Russia and China are obvious international security threats to Canada and its allies. Both authoritarian states pose an existential risk to the rules based international order and to Canadians' safety and way of life. Meeting those threats, however, requires a nuanced understanding of where those risks are most acute, not an exaggerated or alarmist panic. A healthy debate on the many risks to Arctic security is important but unsupported implications and insinuation don't help. I would love to ask the *National Post's* editorial board what their 'step two' really is, to see if they can do better than the Underpants Gnomes.