Do words speak louder than actions?
Sovereignty theatre in Canadian Arctic policy

Val Muzik
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Prof. Gabrielle Slowey
York University

One could be forgiven for being confused as to whether the Canadian government is doing enough to protect the Arctic's security. Some analysts, such as Michael Byers (2009) and LCol. Paul Dittmann (2009), argue that because of an increase in international, particularly Russian and American, interest in the region's resource and shipping potential, Canada's sovereign claim to certain aspects of geography, particularly the Northwest Passage, is threatened unless Canada focuses more on deterrence through a more robust military presence in the area. Others, like Franklin Griffiths and F. Whitney Lackenbauer, do not see a genuine security and hence sovereignty threat from other states due to the fact that there are a number of international institutions wherein Arctic states cooperate; they also view current levels of military expenditures as appropriate and instead see other types of activity such as environmental stewardship or social and economic development as more important (Haftendorn, 2009). Still others, especially Indigenous leaders like Mary Simon (2009), see the Canadian government as more or less having failed to protect the human security of Indigenous Arctic people, *and* argue that the human security of Indigenous peoples is an important buttress to Canada's claim of Arctic territorial sovereignty.

What these examples do show, however, besides disagreement on fundamentals like threat levels and securitization frames, is how closely interwoven ideas of security in the Arctic are with sovereignty—to the extent that even when the type of security considered more relevant gets shifted, the issue of sovereignty is still taken up, even if only to be debated. This discursive linkage is, of course, nothing new, reaching back at least as far as the expeditions of J. E. Bernier and, much later, the Cold War, and is readily seen throughout government statements and documents. Borrowing from the concept of security theatre, which, broadly, is about "reassuring publics, or being seen to do something" regarding a perceived security risk (Jarvis 2015, 316),

this paper develops the idea of *sovereignty theatre* as a new way to describe how the Canadian government approaches the issue of Arctic sovereignty. This paper argues that the Harper government's policy towards Arctic security was one more of sovereignty theatre: of doing and saying things that appear to be very assertive in terms of expressing sovereignty, but are either marginally effectual or empty gestures. To prove this, it will compare the government's speech acts—its pieces of policy and announcements, particularly as expressed in the Speeches from the Throne and press releases from the period—to the material results of its actions, particularly in the form of economic expenditures to fund research stations and to enhance military capabilities in the Arctic and in terms of efforts made to address the persistent social problems affecting Arctic society, particularly First Nations and Inuit communities.

Introduction: security theatre versus sovereignty theatre

"Security theatre" is a term coined by cryptologist and security expert Bruce Schneier that describes a practice that is intended to make people feel safer without actually having a meaningful impact on their safety or reducing risk (Anderson and Fuloria 2009, 1; Davidson 2015). While the term has been used most frequently in the context of airport security and cybersecurity with a referent object of terrorism (see, for example, Davidson (2015) and Jarvis (2015)), it can also be usefully extended to other kinds of political actors and contexts, such as states and politicians. The utility in this approach is that it makes salient the use of speech acts to achieve a political purpose, which, in the case of the Harper government, had to do with communicating to the Canadian and international public the reassuring message that the government would ensure that the Arctic would remain safe from threats.

It is worth mentioning here that there are, in fact, several security threats that are perceived to exist towards the Arctic, owing to there being several strands of securitization at work regarding the Canadian state's relationship to the Arctic which impact the way that security is understood— and which become more or less salient depending on the political needs and context of the time frame in question. Scott Watson's work on macrosecuritization in the Canadian Arctic reveals that, of the overlapping security claims, military-focused threats to sovereignty have been historically given more weight than, for example, environmental or Indigenous social security (266). The dominance of the securitization of sovereignty threats is such that actors such as Mary Simon (2009) have linked their concerns—in this case, the need for greater Inuit self-determination—to the mainstream discourse on Canadian Arctic sovereignty as a way to bolster their legitimacy in the eyes of state actors. This follows from the argument that legitimate sovereignty is *jurisdictional*: a state is sovereign over a given area if its laws are capable of being enforced over the area's human residents and geography, which extends to such matters as human welfare and environmental protection as well as defence.

Thus, as far as a security theatre in the Arctic is concerned, it may be more accurate to identify the strand of it as it applies to the Canadian Arctic as *sovereignty theatre* given the primacy of sovereignty to the ways in which legitimate security concerns are constructed. In this case, the term sovereignty theatre can be taken to identify *a body of practices that collectively reassures people that the state has continued control and jurisdiction over a geographical territory*. These practices are, as one might expect, chiefly speech acts such as press releases, budgets, and delivered speeches, although they also encompass "materialized" actions such as breaking ground for a new port—Nanisivik—or a new research station in Cambridge Bay. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the extent of contact the majority of Canadians and, for

that matter, citizens of other states, have with the Arctic regions is mediated through text and images; similar to Jean Baudrillard's famous provocation that the Gulf War did not happen, to most people, the Arctic does not "exist"—even though the concept of the Arctic is routinely deployed in the construction of Canadian national identity. In this way, actions undertaken within and images of the Canadian Arctic are used to support the idea of this imagined community/geography by virtue of their being viewed through a series of romanticized and nationalistic lenses; this renders the *idea* of the Arctic as something that must be protected in order to safeguard the continued existence of Canada as it understands itself.

The politics of sovereignty

Looking to statements about the Arctic made during the Harper government, it is frequently discussed chiefly in terms of sovereignty and threats thereto. For example, of the seven Speeches from the Throne made during this time, five address the Arctic directly, with all of these also referring to the issue of sovereignty. A good example comes from the second Speech from the Throne on October 16, 2007: discussing the Arctic at length, it seems to set the tone of the government's discourse by using Canadian national identity and history to support a sovereignty claim ("Canada [is] a northern nation"), which then proceeds into discussing threats to this sovereignty and actions the government will take to defend it (Parliament of Canada 2007). This speech references both "new [economic] opportunities" in the Arctic, as well as "new challenges from other shores," which, together, justify the creation of an "integrated northern strategy" that focuses on strengthening Canada's sovereignty by way of solidifying jurisdictional abilities like environmental protection, facilitating social and economic development, and "improving and devolving governance" (ibid. 2007). The speech goes on to

elaborate on plans to build an Arctic research station, fully map the Arctic seabed, and enhance regional military capabilities with new patrol ships, aerial surveillance, and expanding the Arctic Rangers (ibid. 2007).

Such themes of the Arctic, and by extension Canada, being vulnerable and in need of robust defence through military and bureaucratic means, recur not only through many subsequent speeches but also in government press releases, the latter of which provide more detail on the substantive actions undertaken by the government on these matters. While foreign threats to the Canadian Arctic were only ambiguously referenced in the 2007 Speech from the Throne, by 2015, the Department of National Defence straightforwardly named “the Putin regime” as a major threat in a press release about the completion of a NORAD exercise in the Arctic which invokes Cold War existential fears with language like a “fine example of...the defence of our continent” (ibid. 2015). In another press release from the same year entitled “Canada Asserts Arctic Sovereignty with Successful Completion of Operation NUNALIVUT,” the Department of National Defence describes exercises that were conducted around Cambridge Bay, Nunavut such as “sovereignty patrols” and ice dives to collect information on the submerged *HMS Erebus* (ibid. 2015). Locating the lost ships of Sir John Franklin’s 1845 Northwest Passage expedition in 2014 was important for the Harper government in terms of being able to assert sovereignty over the contested waterway by way of an historical claim, and subsequent mention of it is likewise significant and deliberate for these reasons. Ships are important to Arctic sovereignty for another reason: their ability to patrol the vast Arctic archipelago. Lacking a deepwater port in the Arctic was seen as a major impediment to this, but in 2015, the government announced it had broken ground in Nanisivik, Nunavut, which, being strategically close to the Northwest Passage, is

intended to help “protect Canadian sovereignty and interests in the north” (Department of National Defence 2015).

Collectively, statements such as these in official government pronouncements do three things: identify threats; identify sectors or entities that are vulnerable to these threats; and establish steps the government is taking to ensure continued security, and also in this case, sovereignty. Although this is a small sample of available documents, several general observations can be made regarding the Harper government’s viewpoint on Arctic sovereignty. First, it is apparent from the discourse that the ability of the Canadian government to retain control over the Arctic--at least the Northwest Passage—is viewed as being moderately to severely compromised—or potentially could be. The direct threat to this ostensibly arises from the activities of other states in the region: although Russia is directly referenced, the arguably larger threat of the United States remains implicit, likely for diplomatic reasons. While viable and in some areas of the Arctic quite serious security concerns like environmental and human security are euphemistically referenced in terms like “social development,” where the Canadian government is concerned, the main security threat in the Arctic seems to be that of a threat to the direct control over the geography—sovereignty—and hence the Canadian national identity. This logic seems to support a plan of action that focuses on increasing military capabilities.

Arctic economics: putting money where one’s mouth is?

Given the kind of language used in the speeches and press releases, the government sounds very successful at anticipating and fending off sovereignty threats. However, all is not as it appears. For example, the 2013 Speech from the Throne mentions that the government established the Canadian High Arctic Research Station (CHARS) (ibid. 2013). However, the

implication that this is a new program is inaccurate: according to Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (since renamed Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada), this new research facility to be constructed in Cambridge Bay, NU is the result of the amalgamation of another federal program with a similar mandate and identical name with the Canadian Polar Commission (INAC 2015). At the same time, Arctic research labs and programs have been forced to close due to lack of funding: for example, the CBC reported in 2012 that PEARL, located in Eureka, NU, and formerly Canada's most northern research laboratory, was forced to close due to operational shortfalls mainly from the discontinuation of the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences, a funding program (ibid. 2012), and another organization called the Polar Climate Stability Network shut down for the same reason (CBC 2010).

It is worth noting that Cambridge Bay, which is 1,300 kilometres south of Eureka, is also strategically located in proximity to the Northwest Passage, the site of perennial sovereignty concerns for the Canadian government. At face value as presented in the official government statements, the plans to establish CHARS here appears as a move that is supportive of both scientific work and sovereignty assertion at the same time, but when considered alongside the quiet removal of Arctic research capabilities which, in the words of one researcher, "causes a big gap in the measurements... [resulting in] losing the ability to know what's going on up there" (CBC 2012), it calls into question how concerned the government was with not only funding research, but also having an accurate scientific picture of Arctic climate conditions which is critical to ensuring the ongoing environmental and human security of not just the region, but also globally. Taken together with failing to mention that this is not a new program, a conclusion that can be drawn is that the Harper government had a higher priority on communicating in ways that made it *appear* as though it was acting strongly in the interests of Canada's Arctic sovereignty.

Another illustration of this concern for appearances is in the Harper government's strategy to procure more ships to patrol the Arctic. It was stated in the 2007 Speech from the Throne that new ships would "guard Canada's Far North and the Northwest Passage," and the same promise was repeated six years later in the 2013 Speech (Parliament of Canada 2013). To this end, in 2011, Irving Shipbuilding was budgeted a $3.1 billion contract to build six to eight Arctic patrol ships (Globe and Mail, 2014); according to the Royal Canadian Navy, these "ice-capable" ships will be able to conduct military activities in the Arctic such as armed surveillance and be used as a helicopter landing site as well as participate in rescue operations (ibid. 2015). However, in October 2014, Jean-Denis Frechette, the Parliamentary Budget Officer, announced that the PBO's analysis found that the budget was only sufficient to procure four ships (CBC 2014, Globe and Mail 2014). Further, the ships that are being built are Polar Class 5; in order to have ice-breaking capabilities for year-round operation in places like Iqaluit and the Northwest Passage, they would require being at least Class 3 (Dittmann 2009, 50). While having better military capabilities in the Arctic is important especially considering that the Navy will be experiencing capabilities gaps due to the on-schedule or early retirement of four of its vessels (Department of National Defence/Royal Canadian Navy 2014), the new ships' lack of adequate icebreaking capacity means that there will be a functional limitation to their service abilities. As Adam Lajeunesse observes, this means that they are ill-suited to the day-to-day operations that entail upholding Canadian law in many parts of the Arctic throughout the year, and furthermore, they would not be able to escort commercial ships and their utility to scientific expeditions such as mapping the ocean floor would also be limited (ibid. 2008, 1042). In summary, what all of this means is that the Royal Canadian Navy will be getting fewer vessels than planned with less

ability to carry out important activities. Granted, the Harper government has acted upon the real need to enhance military capabilities in the Arctic; however, given that icebreaking has historically been the main way that Canada has exerted its control and sovereignty over especially the Northwest Passage and is necessary for maintaining jurisdictional control generally in the Arctic (Lajeunesse 2008, 1042), the proposed additions to Canada's fleet, much like the research laboratory development in Cambridge Bay, seem like they are more for show of sovereignty defence rather than representing the best use of resources.

The case of human (in)security in the Arctic as non-argument for sovereignty

The lives and living conditions of Northerners, particularly Indigenous Canadians, is given but brief mention in the Speeches from the Throne when it comes to sovereignty, and yet, as leaders like Mary Simon observe, this is exactly where the government should be focusing in order to substantiate its claims. In the Speech from 2007, for example, a pledge to create better housing for First Nations and Inuit people is mentioned in passing in connection with taking "advantage of the North's vast opportunities" (Parliament of Canada, 2007). Economic opportunities for Northerners are again focused on in the 2008 and 2013 Speeches from the Throne, while the 2010 speech briefly mentions continuing to work on devolution. Most of the discussion in these documents on the lives of Indigenous peoples is in the 2011 Speech from the Throne, which lists in some detail the ways in which the government proposed ways that it is prioritizing "to renew and deepen our relationship" such as through facilitating economic development, access to clean water, and better educational opportunities (Parliament of Canada, 2011). It should be noted, however, that Indigenous Canadians are spoken of in the Speeches from the Throne as a unified group, and specific reference to those living in the Arctic is oblique,

if present at all. Furthermore, as a database search of all press releases from INAC during the Harper government with the keyword “Arctic” reveals (available at http://news.gc.ca/web/srch-rchrch-en.do?mthd=advSrch), the majority of government attention went to natural resource development.

As Slowey (2013) demonstrates through the case study of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation in Old Crow, Yukon, developing resources such as oil and gas can benefit Indigenous communities in the Arctic when they have devolution in that it can allow them to better meet their human security needs (188). Economic development is an important part of the equation when it comes to ensuring when it comes to healthy Northern communities, as is self-government. However, Simon (2009) adds to this that while these are necessary, if the government of Canada wishes to legitimate its sovereign claim over the Arctic, it must do more than to only pursue the profits garnered from natural resources and take a more active role in implementing social programs for Arctic residents (252). She notes that progress here has been intermittent, resulting in a widening gap of indicators of well-being between Inuit and average Canadians, such as a suicide rate that is more than 11 times the national average (ibid. 253). In the case of Nunavut, which achieved self-governance in 1999, devolution and its attendant control over programs and services like healthcare and education has actually meant that their quality has declined; without a sound economy, less funding is available for these programs, and as a result, Nunavummiut are even less able to take advantage of economic opportunities that may present themselves (Légaré 2008, 367).

Thus, while there are cases where devolution has created conditions for Indigenous people in the Arctic to empower themselves, there are other examples where it has not (yet) lived up to its expectations, more resembling the Canadian government’s unofficial policy of benign neglect

that so prominently defined its relationship with Arctic Indigenous peoples throughout the 20th century. In spite of the government's statements and even genuine intentions about giving Northern residents more opportunities through primarily resource-based economic development and further devolving political control, this is not always as beneficial as they present it to be; otherwise, not enough is being done to directly address critical issues in the societies themselves. Considering the present conditions in Nunavut, wherein the majority of the Northwest Passage lies, if the human security of many of its inhabitants were to be used to legitimate Canada's claim of sovereignty—as Mary Simon argues should be the case—then the evidence presented is weak indeed. While it is certainly true that the Harper government, with a few small examples, by and large did not explicitly link the residence of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic to its sovereignty argument, preferring a "use it or lose it" stance, generally omitting Inuit and First Nations peoples from the discourse means that attention is not drawn to them and to the significant problems that they face. Under the logic of sovereignty theatre, then, while statements such as committing to develop Northern economies appear to indicate a continued interest in the well-being of its residents, in actual fact, continued high levels of human insecurity suggest the opposite and do little to support sovereignty claims from a social and jurisdictional perspective.

Conclusion

Sovereignty theatre is a preliminary concept that, in the case of Canada, can be used to fruitfully understand the communications of the Harper government regarding Arctic sovereignty relative to the material consequences of its actions. While this does not necessarily mean that there is an effective disconnect between what it says it will do and what it does, the emphasis, as has been demonstrated, is clearly on verbal expressions that indicate continued control over and

interest in the Arctic--though some sectors command more interest, and hence utility to, Canadian sovereignty narratives than others. Partially due to the remoteness of the Arctic, maintaining sovereign control seems to have much to do with how this is expressed. In analyzing the government's economic expenditures where they related to issues that it highlighted as important to maintaining sovereignty—ship procurement and research lab building—and in analyzing the discourse around versus the realities of the well-being of Indigenous Arctic inhabitants—another sector that is important to legitimating claims of sovereignty yet is *not* highlighted by the government—this paper has shown that, at least as far as Canadian sovereignty claims in the Arctic are concerned, words speak louder than actions. It is quite ironic, therefore, that the government stated in the Speech from the Throne on June 3, 2011 that "the strongest expression of our sovereignty comes through presence and actions, not words" (Parliament of Canada, 2011). However, as with any piece of theatre, this is merely illustrative of the prerogative to create a believable narrative. Considering the Arctic, it is important for the government to communicate that it is acting to support its sovereign claim: so important that the words supersede the acts themselves.

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