

Third Base: The Case for CFB Churchill

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Credit: Anonymous Donor, Wikimedia Commons

Canada's third naval base? The Port of Churchill has long been dominated by the grain elevator and workhouse, flanked by grain storage bins.

In August 2016, the port of Churchill, Manitoba, abruptly stopped operations. In the past, shipping season operations consisted of loading grain on to a handful of freight ships for export overseas. But economic factors shifted demand for grain shipping services elsewhere after the government of Stephen Harper ended the Canadian Wheat Board monopoly in 2012. As a result, Omnitrax, a company based in Denver, which purchased the port and the railroad connecting it to the south of Canada in the 1990s, froze assets to cut costs. This means that despite government rhetoric about Canada's Arctic sovereignty claims, the only fully-fledged deep water port in the Canadian North was not operational for more than two years, and its rail link was left to fall into disrepair.

Economic concerns in the North are important and, increasingly, so are security and sovereignty concerns. According to the recent report by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, the geopolitical situation in the Arctic is expected to become more complex in the decades to come, as state actors such as Russia and China increasingly demonstrate strategic interests there.¹ And yet, Canada does not have a permanent base in the Arctic. There is, of course, the continuing construction of a refuelling facility at Nanisivik, Nunavut, which is expected to become operational in summer 2019. But, although an important future element of Canada's maritime capabilities, this

facility is a far cry from naval bases of Canada's European Arctic neighbours.

This article will first look into reasons why the absence of an Arctic naval base is a potential strategic problem for Canada. Then it will discuss why developing such a base in Churchill may help solve this problem, and provide economic benefits in the North at the same time.

The Problem: Lack of a Permanent Arctic Naval Base

Both the previous Conservative and the current Liberal governments emphasized Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic in their statements and strategy documents. Part of affirming sovereignty means having a government presence there. The Conservative government announced plans to build a "docking and refuelling facility" at Nanisivik in 2007.² However, the project was scaled back in 2012 due to mounting costs to become, essentially, a "gas station" for ships operating in the Northwest Passage.³ The Liberal government promised to focus on sovereignty in the Arctic in its 2017 defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, mainly by boosting surveillance and monitoring. Nothing was mentioned about naval bases.⁴

The Harper/Conservative government introduced a long-term shipbuilding program, which the Liberal government kept. This program will build several ship types that will increase the ability of both the Royal Canadian Navy



Credit: Clare Kines

Associate Minister of National Defence, Julian Fantino (second from the right), participates in the official ground-breaking ceremony for the Nanisivik Naval Facility on 15 July 2015.

and the Canadian Coast Guard to operate in the North. The National Shipbuilding Strategy (NSS) includes six Arctic Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPVs). These ships are not icebreakers but they are ice-capable ships designed to spend time in the Arctic during the summer navigation season. The first AOPV, HMCS *Harry DeWolf*, has been launched and is expected to become operational in the summer of 2019. However, there is no permanent Arctic base for these ships, and that could be a problem in the long term, as the region becomes more accessible and its geopolitical significance grows.

Why is it important for Canada to have a base in the Arctic? Both the classic naval theorists, such as Alfred Thayer Mahan, and modern scholars, such as Geoffrey Till, point out that favourable geography alone, although important, does not lead to the development of sea power. Rather, it is the efficient allocation of resources by the government that serves as a primary factor in gaining maritime capabilities. Some countries which have the perfect geography to focus on maritime capabilities, such as New Zealand,

suffer from ‘sea blindness,’ and ignore their unique maritime position in their public policy.⁵ Others, like the Dutch in the 17th century, England in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the United States in the 20th century, have taken advantage of their geography to pursue government policy aimed at gaining, retaining and increasing their sea power.⁶ A key question then will be: does Canada want to develop its maritime capabilities in the North and take full advantage of its unique Arctic geography and status as one of the five Arctic coastal states?

The remoteness of the Canadian North creates a natural security barrier, but that same remoteness contributes to the challenge of managing its security, economy and environment. The cost of sustaining any government maritime policies in the Arctic could be prohibitive, which was the main reason why the Harper government had to scale back and/or postpone its ambitious projects in the North. As a result, Canada’s maritime strategy has a gaping hole when it comes to the Arctic.

On the one hand, the Canadian navy and Coast Guard are being modernized in the National Shipbuilding Strategy. On the other hand, sea power does not arise only from having ships alone. Mahan wrote about the importance of securing naval bases where warships could stop to re-supply and repair. Such bases allow for the command of the sea, if located strategically.⁷ A vivid example of such a base is Gibraltar, which England secured in the 18th century and retained ever since. China is currently in the process of developing maritime bases in the South China Sea, much to the chagrin of other states which claim the islands on which China is building.

A 2018 report by the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) notes that Nordic countries and Russia invest significantly more resources into Arctic



Credit: US Embassy Canada

The town of Churchill as seen from the primary port building on 9 June 2012.



Credit: Davie Shipbuilding

Canada's primary polar icebreaker, CCGS *Louis St. Laurent*, departs Davie Shipbuilding after a refit in June 2014.

infrastructure and sea power than Canada.⁸ Even a brief glance at the Russian Arctic coast reveals the scale of that investment. There are at least a dozen military bases and facilities, many of which are scheduled for modernization.⁹ The same is happening in Norway which has not only declared the Arctic as a priority in the government strategy documents, but also followed up with heavy investments into infrastructure in the region, including transportation and communications.¹⁰ (It should be noted, however, that the maritime conditions in Norway are very different than in Canada because, despite its northern location, much of the water along the coast of Norway remains ice-free.)

As indicated in an April 2019 government report on climate change, the Canadian North is warming up at a rate twice as fast as the rest of the world.¹¹ This means that the region will soon become more accessible for maritime traffic. But the necessary infrastructure to manage and support this traffic is lagging behind. The state of the Canadian Coast Guard fleet and slow rate of its modernization and vessel replacement illustrates that. Some Arctic experts say that the infrastructure investment in the region will start to pay off for the Nordic countries and Russia in the next two decades in terms of increased capabilities to access resources and control the sea routes.¹² Therefore, to keep up with the changing global geopolitical situation, the changing environment and the changing economy, Canada needs to develop its Arctic facilities, or at least modernize the existing ones. However, nothing of the sort is currently taking place with the exception of the facility at Nanisivik.

The Solution: The Port of Churchill and Icebreakers

Churchill, Manitoba, could be a perfect candidate for an Arctic naval base – to supplement the commercial port

already there – for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is in a location which has already been used as a military base, although this was many years ago, not to mention the fact that there already exists a permanent population with skills required to run a port.

Second, at least some infrastructure necessary for a maritime base already exists in Churchill. It is connected to the south both by rail and by air, as it is a tourist site during the summer. It is the only Arctic port in Canada that has a direct rail link to the south of the country and to rail networks in the United States. Thus, it can be more easily supplied and maintained than a distant outpost on a barren island in the Northwest Passage. As well, there is already a marine fuel tank farm there.

Third, Churchill is a deep water port, and it provides a potentially lucrative commercial shipping link with Europe and the rest of the world. Although exports and imports via Churchill have not been robust, which is why the port was closed, there is no reason why this could not be changed given upgrades to the rail service and the port. Churchill provides a convenient shipping port for goods grown or resources extracted in Western Canada to cross the Atlantic. The distance from Calgary to Churchill, for example, is 1,525 kilometres, whereas from Calgary to Halifax is more than 4,000 kilometres, so goods could be loaded on to ships for transport from Churchill. By sea, however, it should be noted that Churchill is far away from the rest of Canada – it's about 2,756 nautical miles from the port in Halifax to the port in Churchill.¹³

As the Arctic sea ice continues to melt, the importance of Churchill will only grow, and increased shipping will require protection and monitoring. The growing strategic importance of the Northwest Passage (and Churchill) in the not-so-distant future, at least on its commercial side, is well recognized both at home and abroad.¹⁴ As an



Credit: Hudson Bay Railway

Photos from summer 2017 provided by Omnitrax show washout damage to the Hudson Bay Railway tracks to Churchill. This location was only one of many damaged by the floods that year. Omnitrax chose not to repair the line due to costs, eventually selling it to Arctic Gateway Group. The line has since been repaired and rail traffic has resumed.

example, a Chinese diplomat visited the town just after the port was closed, and potential Chinese investors inspected the port in May 2018.¹⁵

Fourth, developing a permanent naval base would help with the issue of infrastructure maintenance at the port. Having this port administered by a private entity has already shown that it is not necessarily more efficient. The federal government and Omnitrax battled in court over whose responsibility it was to do repairs of the rail link damaged by floods in May 2017.¹⁶ In late August 2018, the Canadian government forked out \$117 million to cover both repairs and maintenance costs for the next 10 years, in order to facilitate the sale of the Omnitrax assets in Churchill to Arctic Gateway Group (AGG), a Canadian private-public partnership, which includes a group representing affected/interested northern communities.¹⁷ After AGG took over control of Omnitrax's assets, the railway was restored back to operational state in just 40 days.¹⁸ Thus, the Canadian government essentially bailed out an American private company which ran Churchill's crucial infrastructure into the ground. Moreover, it is only a limited fix because developing a permanent naval base to supplement the existing commercial port and the related infrastructure would require more extensive investment and effort.

Another element to enhance the utility of a permanent naval base in the Arctic is to build a fleet of modern icebreakers, or modernize existing ones. This point relates more to the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) than to the navy as it is the CCG that operates icebreakers and generally plays a larger role in the Arctic than the navy. Currently, navigation season in the Northwest Passage and Hudson Bay is only a few months, from about mid-July to early November. This means that supplies can be delivered to port facilities by sea only during this relatively short window. During the rest of the year, Churchill would have the advantage of resupply via rail, whereas Nanisivik, for

example, can be only resupplied by air outside the short navigation season, which makes its operational costs very high. Icebreakers could help prolong navigation and extend the period when facilities could be used and supplied.

The issue is that Canada's fleet of icebreakers is very old and very small considering the size of Canada's northern territories. Again, the country is lagging behind its Nordic counterparts and Russia when it comes to icebreaker technology and investment into building the fleets.¹⁹ For example, Russia has 46 icebreakers with another 15 either under construction or planned, and Finland has 10. To compare, Canada has only seven aging icebreakers, and has plans to build one new vessel.²⁰ And, as noted earlier, icebreakers are operated by the coast guard not the navy, so the maritime base in Churchill could accommodate the CCG and other government departments as well.

The icebreaker component of Canada's naval strategy in the North has suffered the same problem as the facility at Nanisivik. In 2013 the planned number of new icebreakers was slashed from two to one, and its construction postponed for four years as the government decided to prioritize the procurement of Joint Support Ships (JSS) in the National Shipbuilding Strategy (NSS). Since both contracts were awarded to the same shipyard, the ships have to be built in sequence – and the JSS were given the green light first. As a result, even if it is not postponed again, the new icebreaker may only be ready by 2021.²¹ For this reason, in August 2018 the government agreed to sole-sourcing the purchase of three used icebreakers from Davie Shipbuilding as a stopgap until replacements are built.²²

Some people might ask why Canada needs icebreakers if the ice is melting in the Arctic. The answer is that, despite climate change and the rapid warming in the North, at least some of the Northwest Passage will still be covered with ice during winter in the foreseeable future, due to the nature of currents and the way sea ice is formed in

Canadian Arctic waters.²³ If the current rate of climate change in the Arctic holds, the role of the icebreakers could be extended to supporting commercial shipping lanes or escorting tourist vessels through the Canadian northern straits. But even before that becomes necessary, Canada needs icebreaker capability because it is necessary for defence and sovereignty operations in the region.

Apart from serving as a base for the AOPVs and coast guard icebreakers, there are a number of other advantages to having a permanent port in the Arctic. It could serve as a hub for developing crucial elements of regional infrastructure, most important of which is transportation. The Canadian Arctic remains largely inaccessible and very difficult to reach, unlike the Norwegian High North with easier access by sea or by air, or the Russian Arctic seaboard which has a few deep water ports accessible by rail.²⁴ Another important infrastructure component is communication, a sector where Canada also lags behind the Scandinavian states. For instance, communities in the

Canadian Arctic rely mostly on Internet connection via satellite, while the Nordic states are successfully building 4G and 5G wireless networks.²⁵

In addition, the presence of a permanent naval – perhaps shared with the coast guard – base would help stimulate population growth and the local economy in and around Churchill. A quick glance at the assets belonging to the two currently active naval bases in Esquimalt and Halifax reveal that both have a significant number of buildings, residential units, roads and other properties under their management.²⁶ It would undoubtedly take time to develop all that infrastructure, but it could be done cheaper and easier in Churchill than at any other site in the North.

Conclusion

One of the essential conditions for developing naval capabilities, as pointed out by sea power theorists, is having strong bases where fleets can go to rest, repair and resupply. While Canada has access to three oceans (the Pacific,



Credit: Timothy Choi

A section of the first Joint Support Ship awaits further assembly at Seaspan Vancouver Shipyards on 13 December 2018. The Joint Support Ships were prioritized over the polar icebreaker.



Credit: Nimara, Flickr

The city of Dudinka is one of several deepwater port cities along Russia's Northern Sea Route, and lies at the mouth of the Yenisei River.

the Atlantic and the Arctic), it has permanent naval bases only on two of them. Given the growing importance of the Arctic for coastal states' security and economy, Canada is taking steps to augment its maritime capabilities in the North. The shipbuilding strategy includes six Arctic-capable warships and an icebreaker. Ottawa is also scheduled to open a naval refuelling facility in Nanisivik, Nunavut, this summer.

However, this is not enough. It would be logical to have a permanent base in the Arctic, too. In fact, Canada already has a good location for such a base – the port of Churchill, Manitoba. There is no denying that Churchill is far from the majority of the population of Canada and difficult to access by sea, but it has a permanent population, it is accessible via railway, and it is a deep water port with existing marine fuel storage facilities. This port of strategic significance was allowed to deteriorate to the point when the private operator company refused to repair the damaged railway. Not only will rebuilding this port close a gaping hole in Canada's maritime policy, but it will also serve as a stepping stone for the growth of infrastructure in the Canadian North in general. Other Arctic states, such as Norway and Russia, have already invested heavily in infrastructure projects in their respective northern regions. Canada urgently needs to find the political will to do so as well. 🇨🇦

Notes

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