

Canada to widen Arctic patrols, PM says

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TUKTOYAKTUK — Canada is expanding by half a million square kilometres the amount of Arctic Ocean it will consider to be Canadian territory for the purpose of policing pollution violations, and will make it mandatory for all ships entering its polar waters to report their presence.

The move is intended to demonstrate that Canada is serious about asserting its territorial claims to the Arctic, including the fabled Northwest Passage, which no other country recognizes as a Canadian waterway.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the measures during a stopover in the Arctic Ocean hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk Wednesday.

He's staging a brief tour of the North to champion Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic on what may be the eve of a federal election call.



The Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker Louis S. St-Laurent sails past an iceberg in Lancaster Sound, July 11, 2008. The Louis was on its annual voyage through Canada's Arctic that includes patrols through the Northwest Passage. (*THE CANADIAN PRESS/Jonathan Hayward*)

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"These measures will send a clear message to the world: Canada takes responsibility for environmental protection and enforcement in our Arctic waters," the Prime Minister said.

Mr. Harper said the race for mineral and petroleum wealth in the polar region, combined with melting Arctic ice, has led to a record number of ships in northern waters. "The proliferation of international shipping in the North raises the potential for shipwrecks, smuggling, illegal immigration and even threats to national security," he said. "But more specifically it raises the potential of environmental threats, like oil spills, poaching and contamination."

Canadian law currently encourages, but does not require, incoming ship traffic in the Arctic to register with national authorities.

Under the existing Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act, Canada also regulates shipping to within 100 nautical miles of its coastline. Ottawa plans to double this limit and patrol the waters for pollution violations.

"This will give us jurisdiction over ... [additional area] roughly equivalent to the land mass of one of the Prairie provinces," Mr. Harper said.

It's hardly a maverick move in international law, because Canada's so-called exclusive economic zone under a United Nations Convention already gives it authority to exploit and manage resources within 200 nautical miles of its coastline.

But it's nevertheless a bolder assertion of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic as an oil-rich and increasingly assertive Russia sends bombers and ships to cast its own bigger shadow there.

However, Canada lacks maritime hardware to enforce its claims. It currently has few resources – aside from one big 39-year-old icebreaker and four smaller ones – capable of chasing interlopers or polluters across the Arctic.

The Tories have committed Canada to buy up to eight Arctic offshore patrol ships, but the contracts have not been granted yet and it will take until at least 2013 for the vessels to arrive. And given Canada's problem-plagued procurement system, it could take even longer.

Just last week, the future of 12 new mid-shore Coast Guard patrol vessels was thrown into limbo when Ottawa scuttled plans to buy them from Canadian suppliers, saying bidders' proposals were too costly. It's starting that process over now, but may end up going offshore to find vessels.

Rob Huebert, associate director of the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, applauded Mr. Harper's announcement. "If you say you are in control, well then, act it."

But he said the United States may challenge Canada's right to require notification if a ship is entering the Northwest Passage, a route it considers an international

waterway.

Dr. Huebert said the United States would likely lodge a quiet diplomatic protest as first step, but added that it's not clear how Washington would proceed after that. If a shipper flying the U.S. flag wanted to defy Canada's reporting requirement, this might bring the issue to the fore, he said.

But Dr. Huebert noted that many foreign vessels have an incentive to register – tacitly accepting Canadian rules on pollution in the process – because this means Canadian authorities will share vital information with them, such as satellite imagery.

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