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Canada flexes its muscles in scramble for the Arctic

- Eight countries lay claim to oil-rich, unspoiled region
- Global warming opens up fabled North-west Passage

Ed Pilkington in New York
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The Northwest Passage, in the Arctic Circle. Photograph: Mark Peterson/Corbis

It is not the kind of militaristic statement expected of the peace-loving Canadians. In front of a choreographed line-up of 120 sailors in their summer whites at a naval base outside Victoria in British Columbia, the prime minister, Stephen Harper, gave a warning to other nations with their eye on the potentially oil-rich Arctic.

"Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty over the Arctic," he said. "We either use it or lose it. And make no mistake, this government intends to use it."

In other places at other times his words could be dismissed as posturing. But he backed them up with the chequebook, announcing that he was ordering up to eight military patrol ships that would be converted for use in ice up to a metre thick, and a new deep-water port that would service them. Total bill: C\$7bn (£3.3bn).

Mr Harper's message, and the belligerent style in which it was delivered, are a sign that the Arctic, the vast ice-covered ocean around the North Pole, is hotting up - both literally, through global warming, and metaphorically as a political issue. With Canada, Denmark, Russia and the United States all having claims on the region, together with those of Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland, international tension in the region is mounting.

There was no dissembling in Mr Harper's speech. "The ongoing discovery of the north's resource riches, coupled with the potential impact of climate change, has made the region a growing area of interest and concern," he said.

As the statement implies, two areas of international competition lie behind the Canadian prime minister's actions. The first is that the Arctic region is rich in natural resources. It is thought to hold up to a quarter of the world's undiscovered reserves of oil and gas, which as the established fields in the Middle East and elsewhere run dry will become increasingly valuable and sought after. There are also known to be major deposits of diamonds, silver, copper, zinc and, potentially, uranium. It also has rich fish stocks.

Desire to exploit these resources has led to tensions with the US over the offshore border between Alaska and Canada, an area known as the "wedge", where one day oil and gas exploration could prove to be lucrative.

The area above the North Pole, which under international law is an area owned by nobody, has also started to be targeted. Last month Russia astonished observers of the region by announcing a virtual land grab of about 400,000 square miles, using the premise that an underwater shelf known as the Lomonosov ridge connects its Arctic territories with the North Pole.

The claim was met with sceptical snorts by many Arctic scientists, who pointed out that Russia's existing oil reserves are likely to be depleted by 2030.

The second area of dispute concerns the holy grail of commercial shipping: the North-west Passage. Once opened, it would shorten the maritime trade route from Europe to Asia by some 2,150 nautical miles from the current navigation through the Panama canal. Efforts to find a way through the perilous icy seas of the Arctic archipelago, linking the ocean with the Pacific, first begun under Martin Frobisher in the 1570s, have claimed many lives, most famously those of Sir John Franklin and his team of 128 men who disappeared in 1845.

But what human effort failed to achieve is now happening through human pollution as global warming starts to open the route by melting the ice cap. Since 2000, commercial shipping has been able to negotiate the route during a short summer period, and scientists expect that annual sliver of time to grow as the ice covers thin.

Canada has long claimed the passage as its own by virtue of its sovereignty over the archipelago but it has had to do so increasingly in the face of US competition. Washington classifies the passage as neutral waters because it claims that Canadian sovereignty only extends a limited distance from the shore and it has outraged Canadian opinion by sending nuclear submarines through the strait.

Dr Pete Ewin, an expert in conservation with the Canadian branch of WWF, sees the mounting tension as a product of the scramble to secure energy resources at a time of depleting stocks. "We are pushing into the frontiers of both knowledge and resources. It is easier to go into the extremes than to change your lifestyle."

Opening up the North-west Passage, he said, would ignite an "ecological time-bomb" because there is no way to clear up oil spills in icy waters. He also warned that a scramble for Arctic resources would threaten its unique wildlife and the Inuit communities that depend on it.

None of which is holding back the Harper government in its declared "Canada First" strategy. As the prime minister summed up on Monday: "The world is changing."

Arctic disputes

Hans Island

Rocky outcrop between Canada's Ellesmere Island and coast of Danish-ruled Greenland long disputed by the two countries. In 1984 a Danish minister for Greenland affairs raised a Danish flag on the island and left a note declaring: "Welcome to the Danish island." Canadian troops riposted by hoisting the Maple Leaf flag.

Northwest Passage

First crossed in three successive seasons by Roald Amundsen of Norway in 1903-6. Last year the Canadian military announced it would henceforth call the region Canadian Internal Waters. But US navy has pointedly patrolled the route.

North Pole

Under international law it is owned by no one. But it is rapidly becoming the world's new frontier zone, with countries scrambling to claim it.

The wedge

The US and Canadian governments are in dispute over offshore boundaries between Canada and Alaska. Three different boundaries are proposed which if drawn on a map resemble a wedge. The area is sensitive as it is potentially rich in oil and gas.

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