

Build an Arctic Gateway for the World

The Northwest Passage offers a 7,000-kilometre shortcut from New Jersey to Shanghai

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper has committed \$1-billion to the Pacific Gateway Initiative, a series of infrastructure investments stretching across the four Western provinces. Seizing on Canada's geographic location, the plan aims to develop the most efficient and secure transportation corridors between North America and Asia. Now, it is time for the next step. It is time for an Arctic Gateway Initiative.

Canada has the longest coastline of any country, most of it in the Arctic. For centuries, that coastline was rendered inaccessible by thick, hard "multiyear" sea ice. But climate change is suddenly causing the sea ice to disappear. More than 1.2 million square kilometres were lost between September of 2006 and September of 2007, leaving the Northwest Passage temporarily ice-free.

Soon, all of the Arctic's sea ice will melt away during the summer months. Ice will still form during the winter, but it will be relatively thin, soft "single year" ice. And this will make icebreaker-assisted, year-round shipping commercially feasible.

Since the Earth is a sphere, Canada's northern coastline is relatively close to both Asia and Europe. The Northwest Passage offers a 7,000-kilometre shortcut from New Jersey to Shanghai.

Churchill, Man., is currently the only commercial deepwater port in northern Canada. Climate change has already extended the shipping season there, from July to November. Long used for shipping grain to foreign markets, Churchill is beginning to see two-way trade. Last month, a Russian vessel arrived with fertilizer from Estonia, and left with wheat for Italy.

OmniTRAX, the company that owns the port and rail line south, is pushing the concept of an "Arctic Bridge" from the Russian port of Murmansk, through Churchill and on into the United States. Mr. Harper came on board last month, contributing \$24-million to upgrades for the port and railway.

But \$24-million is chump change compared to the \$1-billion for the Pacific Gateway Initiative. New highways, bridges and railway overpasses are being built across the Lower Mainland of B.C. A new container terminal is under construction at Prince Rupert, the Trans-Canada Highway through Banff National Park is being fully twinned and new road interchanges are being built in Edmonton, Saskatoon and Winnipeg.

Why isn't the North part of this ambitious plan?

It is not as if Mr. Harper has been ignoring the Arctic. He has moved to strengthen Canada's military presence, announcing ice-strengthened patrol vessels for the navy and a refurbished refuelling facility at Nanisivik. But while such steps will facilitate the application of Canadian laws to foreign ships, they do little to promote trade and economic development.

An Arctic Gateway Initiative would embrace the North as a transportation opportunity. All-season roads would be pushed through to Tuktoyaktuk, Bathurst Inlet and Baker Lake. Deep-water ports would be built near the mouth of the Mackenzie River and at Bathurst Inlet and Iqaluit.

The Canadian Coast Guard would be charged with developing safe, commercially attractive, all-season shipping routes through the Canadian Arctic. This work would involve maintaining navigation devices and producing detailed charts. It would also, critically, involve breaking ice for commercial vessels - including foreign ones.

The Coast Guard already breaks ice for cargo ships in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Saguenay River during the winter months.

A new icebreaker in Hudson Bay could add several months to the shipping season at Churchill. Additional icebreakers could ensure safe transits for commercial vessels through the Northwest Passage, initially for three or four months, and before long throughout the year.

Arctic hubs for the transportation of goods to and from North America would relieve pressure on Vancouver, Prince Rupert, Halifax and Montreal. They would create jobs and spur economic development, not just locally but across the country too.

Most significantly, providing icebreaking for foreign vessels in the Northwest Passage would cement Canada's claim to sovereignty there. For what cargo ship is going to refuse the offer of a safe, cost-effective transit on the basis that it does not want to ask Canada's permission to sail through?

Arctic sovereignty is only partly about using it or losing it. It is also about ensuring that when foreign ships enter Canada's Arctic, they do so on our terms. Let's give them an incentive to work with us. Let's build an Arctic Gateway for the world.

Michael Byers is the author of *Intent for a Nation: What is Canada For?*