

Strengthening Canada's Position in the Arctic

Mr. Speaker, international interest in the North has been increasing steadily over the past few years. As the effects of climate change increase access to the Arctic, the global geopolitical context for the region is changing.

With enormous untapped opportunities for shipping, research and resource development, many countries are looking to influence the development of policies and international agreements that will benefit them and their interests in the region.

Global powers like China, Russia and the United States are deliberately ramping up their presence and level of activity within their own borders and across the circumpolar world in an effort to secure and further their national priorities.

Of particular interest to these nations is the potential for new – and shorter – shipping routes through the Arctic Ocean. There is also distinct interest in the resource potential of the Arctic, as changing sea ice and climatic conditions make previously stranded resources more accessible.

Other countries are investing heavily in infrastructure, developing national plans, and trying to influence international policies in anticipation of new opportunities in the Arctic so they can better pursue their national interests. Canada, so far, has not kept pace with its own efforts to establish its role or interests in the Arctic, let alone ensure the people of the Arctic have the same or even similar quality of life as southern Canadians.

For its part, Canada has interests in the Arctic beyond simple geographic sovereignty, even if as a nation we are not entirely clear about them.

Resource potential is maybe the most obvious one. We already know there are substantial reserves of onshore and offshore oil and gas in the region that are not being developed. These reserves are only going to become more strategically significant as China – for one – continues to look to lock in secure energy sources to fuel its economic growth.

We are also home to many of the minerals that will fuel the global green economy, including cobalt, gold, lithium, bismuth, and rare earth elements. The makers of batteries, solar panels, wind turbines, hand-held electronics and computers rely on these minerals to make their products more efficient.

The North also has significant potential as a hub for international trade and transportation. The polar route can cut as much as 20 days off the time it takes to reach Asia from Europe, and airports in the territories are closer to Beijing, Tokyo, Moscow and other European capitals than southern cities.

As a nation, Canada should be looking to capitalize on these advantages, and start capitalizing on the opportunity to capture a piece of the global trade that is currently passing through our airspace and waters.

These investments, if made strategically with proper consultation, consideration and decision making with Indigenous, territorial and federal governments at the helm, will be instrumental in bringing prosperity and jobs to our communities. They are opportunities to grow local and regional economies, build wellness and shape the future of Canada from the Northwest Territories.

While the case for northern development might be clear to us here in the Northwest Territories, we are competing with a lot of other priorities on the national stage, and we need to make sure we are doing our part to promote our interests in southern Canada.

While Canada likes to think of itself as a northern country, Mr. Speaker, the North continues to be a bit of a mystery to many Canadians. Educating them and their leaders about the realities of the North, the people who live here and our needs and priorities is an important part of generating support for national action to strengthen Canada's position in the Arctic.

That is why I have been calling for the creation of a national plan for strengthening Canada's position in the Arctic in my meetings with my fellow Premiers. I have also been taking my message to the public and to influential academics and policy makers who are involved in thinking about the Arctic.

As part of these efforts, the GNWT co-hosted a national mini-conference on this topic with the Institute for 21st Century Questions in Toronto. Speakers at the conference included Nunavut Premier Joe Savikataaq, former Quebec Premier and federal Cabinet Minister Jean Charest, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of National Defence Peter Mackay, and former federal MP Martha Hall-Findlay, as well as a number of leading academics. Attendees included a number of other political figures, business leaders, senior government officials and academics.

Later today, at the appropriate time, I will table a copy of remarks made by myself and by Premier Savikataaq at the event.

The feedback I have been getting nationally, Mr. Speaker, has been positive. My fellow Premiers and others I have been talking to in the south are very interested in the potential of the North and agree that Canada needs a plan.

Turning the massive potential of the North into sustainable Northern communities and jobs and opportunities for ourselves and all Canadians will take determination, commitment and significant investment in nation building projects. As Northerners, we need to keep the discussion going, Mr. Speaker, and do our part to make sure that our territories and our people are the beneficiaries of the new international interest in the Arctic.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.