

Mulroney Accepted Nuclear Submarine Transits in BC

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John Clearwater - November 6, 2006 - The US Navy, as the premier power-projection force of the United States, would not allow any restriction on travel in waters anywhere in the world. Their blanket position is that the entire world is the operational area for the U.S. Navy, and that there are no sovereign areas. Total freedom of movement remains non-negotiable.

<http://web.ncf.ca/da710/index.html>

Full Article

The problem of transit by nuclear armed weapons systems had been with the Canadian government for decades, and in the case of aircraft had been resolved back in the early 1950s. However, ships were a different problem.

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Although both the Diefenbaker and Pearson cabinets had worried about this issue, neither was able to resolve it to the satisfaction of nationalists within their cabinets.

The information was discovered in documents released by the U.S. Air Force in response to a Canadian access to information act request to the department of national defence. The declassified documents form part of the newly-released book ?Just Dummies: Cruise Missile Testing in Canada? by nuclear weapons specialist John Clearwater.

The issue came back in force during the early Reagan administration when a long- planned naval construction programme finally came to fruition. The eighteen new Ohio/Trident SSBNs, with 24 Trident missile each, would carry about 50% of the total warheads in the US strategic force.

This was all very important to Canada as the site chosen for the new submarine base was in the north-west state of Washington, just south of Vancouver and Victoria, British Columbia. The US Navy announced the selection of Bangor, Washington, as west coast homeport for the planned

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Ohio SSBNs in 1973. SUBASE Bangor Naval Complex, located on the Hood Canal, is about 250 km from the Pacific Ocean with access through the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

The USS Ohio arrived in Washington on 12 August 1982 after transitting the Strait of Juan de Fuca for the first time. The boat made its first nuclear patrol with Trident I SLBMs in October 1982, transitting to the Pacific Ocean through Canadian waters south of Vancouver Island.

Canada has a number of territorial boundary disputes with the United States on both coasts. The complexities of the Law of the Sea, as well as the expansionist tendencies of the United States and the fight by both countries for the best fishing and resource areas, has left unresolved certain disputed areas.

The boundary line between the two countries in the Strait of Juan de Fuca was determined by an arbitration award made in 1872 by the Emperor of Germany, and slightly amended by the International Boundary Demarcation Treaty of 11 April 1908. It is the stated position of the government of Canada that all waters on the Canadian side of the line are the internal waters of Canada.

The transit by the Trident submarines was a thorn in the side of Ottawa, as it was through maritime territory and infringed on Canadian sovereignty. However, the official position of the US Government is that even offensive military forces of the US Navy have full rights to transit all foreign sovereign waters, even when submerged.

After the base was set up, but before the submarines arrived, Canada and the United States signed the Vessel Traffic Management Agreement. The 19 December 1979 document regulated marine traffic through the Strait and applied to naval vessels, including submarines. It was the Canadian Coast Guard position that submarines should make the transit fully submerged, as they were a hazard at periscope depth. Since outbound traffic to the Pacific stayed north of the line, and inbound traffic to the south, the Trident submarines would pass through Canadian internal waters each time they set out on a combat patrol. The U.S. recognized the Canadian claim, and entered into negotiations for the transits as soon as the first submarine arrived at Bangor.

Through 1983 the Canadian government worked hard at an agreed position to present to Washington. By mid 1983, a tentative decision had been made, and it was communicated to the U.S. government at the 167th Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) meeting on 11

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October.

Although External Affairs was repeatedly explaining the Canadian position to Washington, Canadian cabinet ministers had not yet seen even a draft memo on the subject.

At this point Ottawa slipped into non-action, and the issue stagnated for almost one more year. In the summer of 1984 External Affairs again took up the issue and tried to determine what consultations would be necessary by meeting with the highest officials from National Defence, Transport, Fisheries and Oceans, Environment, Health and Welfare, and the Privy Council Office. The team was now on the fifth draft of a decision. This had been prompted by the upcoming meeting of the PJBD and the knowledge that the US would once again ask about the status of Canadian willingness to allow the transits.

During an August meeting with US Secretary of the Navy John Lehmann and the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, the Commander of Maritime Command Pacific in British Columbia, Admiral Woods, was asked to "expedite the issue" for the US. At the end of 1984 the United States formally requested Canadian permission to send their ballistic missile submarines through the Canadian side of the Strait of Juan de Fuca while submerged.

On 22 January 1985, the Mulroney cabinet discussed submerged transit of strait, but the issue was not resolved and it was set over for two months. A tacit agreement was reached between the two governments: Mulroney knew full well that no objection to US operational plans would be entertained, even if they did involve Canadian territory. Thus he decided that Canada should sign a diplomatic note, and a full draft was ready in mid- February. Again the issue sat until the autumn when External Affairs again briefed their minister.

More drafts were produced, and the issue held on until the end of the year. In December the prime minister was told that the formal exchange of notes was expected shortly.(2) The summer of 1986 came and went with only another briefing, but no agreement. Finally, on 12 May 1988, the Canadian ambassador, Allan Gotlieb, was authorized to sign an exchange of notes with the US on the "safety of navigation." (3) The outcome was an agreement which built on the VTM agreement of 1979, in that the Tridents would be allowed to transit through Canadian internal waters without further permission, yet they would be subject to the notification and control procedures set out in VTM.

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The Canadian government could congratulate itself on doing what was necessary to protect sovereignty, and the US Navy got what it demanded. With a simple exchange of notes, Canada once more gave up more sovereignty to the United States, and more nuclear weapons would transit through Canada on a regular basis.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) Please see chapters 1, 8, annex C, and annex D in the "US Nuclear Weapons in Canada" (Dundurn Press, Toronto, 2000).

(2) 11 December 1985 Memorandum for the Prime Minister from Paul Tellier, re: Canada - USA Arrangements in regard to defence, defence production and defence sharing. Secret.

(3) 12 May 1988 Privy Council 1988-893. (DFAIT file 27-8-USA-2).

?Just Dummies: Cruise Missile Testing in Canada?

By John Clearwater

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