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OTTAWA—With other nations eyeing rich Arctic resources, Canada is "ratcheting up" its claims on the territory with its purchase of up to eight new armed ships to patrol contested northern waters.

But Prime Minister Stephen Harper's decision to opt for lighter patrol vessels rather than the three full-fledged icebreakers he promised during the last election means that ice-clogged waters will be off-limits for months at a time to Canada's navy, experts say.

Harper's announcement yesterday of new Arctic ships for the navy is a "compromise," said Michael Byers, professor at the University of British Columbia who specializes in global issues.

"We're going to get ships that aren't really what we need for the Arctic," he said.

And with the government spending upwards of \$7.4 billion to buy, operate and maintain these new vessels, Byers fears there'll be no money left to replace the Coast Guard's fleet of aging icebreakers, which are the true workhorses in the Arctic.

"I'm very worried that the end result will be that we won't have the capability to operate anywhere at anytime in a Canadian Arctic that is drawing huge amounts of attention from commercial operators and nation states," Byers said in an interview.

Harper defended his announcement yesterday, saying the new ships will be more versatile than the icebreakers he promised in the heat of the election.

"We opted in the end for medium icebreakers, far more of them, and with the capability to patrol a wide range of Canadian waters," he said during a news conference at CFB Esquimalt, a base near Victoria, B.C., that is home to the navy's Pacific fleet.

He also made it clear that staking a Canadian claim to the north was also behind his government's decision to move ahead with a new deepwater port in the far north to serve as a hub for the new ships as well as commercial vessels.

"Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty over the Arctic. Either we use it or lose it," Harper said.

"Make no mistake, this government intends to use it."

Indeed, the announcement comes at a time when the federal government has faced growing international claims on northern territory. Denmark and Canada, for example, are embroiled in a dispute over ownership claims to Hans Island — a football-field-sized rock between Ellesmere Island and Greenland.

More recently, a team of Russian geologists claimed "new evidence" that could exert that country's control over more than 1 million square kilometres of oil-rich seabed in the remote Arctic.

With the Arctic's mineral riches attracting international attention and a receding ice cover making the region more accessible to international shipping than ever before, Harper said a strong Canadian presence is imperative.

"The world is changing. The ongoing discovery of the north's resource riches couple with the potential impact of climate change has made

the region a growing area of interest and concern," he said.

"It is no exaggeration to say that the need to assert our sovereignty and protect our territorial integrity in the Arctic – on our terms – has never been more urgent," he said.

The vessels will have steel-reinforced hulls to navigate ice as thick as one metre, making them able to sail the Northwest Passage during the summer, a waterway that has sparked sovereignty debates with the United States.

The ships, each about the size of a 134-metre long frigate, will have a helicopter landing pad able to accommodate the new CH-148 Cyclone choppers due in the fleet over the coming years. The first of the new Canadian-made ships is expected in 2013.

Eric Lerhe, a retired commodore who commanded naval task forces in the Persian Gulf, said the proposed ships were the right choice for the job and will be able to do electronic surveillance watching for submarines, ships and aircraft.

"You need that ability. It can go up there and patrol for sovereignty today and it can take charge of the big picture surveillance, coordination and armed response should we be challenged," Lerhe said.

And he said Ottawa's decision to dispatch armed navy vessels to Arctic waters sends a strong signal to other nations about the Canada's intent to defend its sovereignty.

"When you start sending up the military, you're ratcheting up the message you wish to send to other countries, like we're not just doing this for our transportation." Lerhe said.

With files from Canadian Press