

Commentary



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Making Canada's Arctic security paradigm fit for purpose: From exceptionalism to geostrategic competition

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The Arctic used to be a flyover region for inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and long-range bombers as part of nuclear posture and deterrence measures between NATO and the USSR. This premise held from the 1950s through the renewal of the North Warning System in 1984. No longer, as the February 2023 episode of spy and other balloons, ostensibly launched by a hostile adversarial state actor, exposed our Arctic vulnerabilities to the North American public. For defence and security purposes, the polar regions, notably the Arctic, are now in play. Russia and China have designs on the Arctic in a geostrategic rivalry with the West. This is fundamentally changing the character of Arctic security, with both countries intent on exploiting the international rules-based order to further adversarial national interests.

Balloons were merely the latest episode in a long-standing spectrum of hostile grey-zone dangers and hybrid warfare below the threshold of armed conflict,

to which no region in North America is arguably more vulnerable and less resourced than the Arctic. In the Canadian North, geopolitical rivals have shown themselves intent on gaining control of critical minerals and attempts to influence Indigenous communities over resource development.

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) has warned repeatedly of state capture of Canadian political, business, financial, and societal elites and institutions along with Canadian university research and institutions. International organizations are being suborned to the detriment of Canada's interests. Foreign state actors are alleged to have broken Canadian law in attempts to influence federal and provincial, and presumably territorial, local and Indigenous politics, elections and political parties. There is a clear and present danger in the diplomatic establishment of malicious state actors, including police operations and intimidation of Canadians and residents.

“ *Arctic vulnerabilities are now a laboratory of experimentation for malicious foreign state actor* ”

For Canada, these developments are particularly problematic. Middle powers have benefited disproportionately from the rules-based order, and thus have a high stake in maintaining it. Arctic sovereignty, then, is not just about rapid change in what is arguably the world's most dynamic environmental, human and military security environment. Rather, it is inseparable from compliance with international laws and acceptable norms, which are coming under ever-mounting adversarial duress. This duress is the new crux of Arctic security and underpins the need for a significant shift in strategy.

Canada's adversaries have the initiative, and Arctic vulnerabilities are now a laboratory of experimentation for malicious foreign state actors: That is the takeaway that should be driving Canada's approach to Arctic security in the update on Canada's 2017 defence policy statement that is now underway. The prevailing notion of the Arctic as a unique zone of broadly benign cooperation has been upended by Russian aggression, China's Arctic ambitions, massive technological developments in maritime and aerospace domains, and climate change. Canada has been ignoring geostrategic developments – at its peril.

Instead of wishful thinking for a bygone era, Canada needs a new narrative to inform behaviour that realigns with actual geostrategic realities: one that prioritizes Arctic security, writ large, for collective defence, Northern prosperity and economic sustainability. To be sure, Ottawa needs to invest in collective defence and deterrence, and foster institutional structures of defence cooperation among friendly Arctic and other allies. However, food and energy insecurity make the Arctic and its communities particularly vulnerable to hostile actors. So, instead of policy silos, Canada really needs a comprehensive whole-of-society strategy underpinned by a whole-of-government approach.

Notwithstanding the rapid shift in the international and Arctic geostrategic and security environment, even Canada's latest *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* remains laden with outdated notions of Arctic exceptionalism: the Arctic as a domain of perpetual peace. Even Canada's 2017 Defence Policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, intentionally skirted NORAD renewal. Leaving NORAD off the latest defence policy update yet again would signal strategic failure and abdication by Canada to allies and adversaries alike, call into question Canada's already tarnished reputation as a responsible and reliable ally, and consequently further diminish Canada's ability to assert its national interest and bolster Canada's decades-long strategy of leveraging NATO, allies and partners to that effect.

To great fanfare, the Canadian government recently announced spending on NORAD. In fact, the government merely repackaged modest spending that it had previously designated. This is emblematic of the Canadian government's broader approach to foreign, defence and security policy: its words speak far louder than its action. Such shortsightedness not only fails to secure Canadian interests, but it is to the detriment of collective defence, relations with European allies and the United States, and local Indigenous communities. The government's anachronistic and strategically unhelpful approach, coupled with domestic political jostling over Arctic issues, have stunted innovation and investment, leaving Canada with an Arctic strategy, policy framework, and a defence policy in name only.

Since 2010 the Arctic has figured more prominently in NATO's geostrategic understanding of collective defence. NATO's Northern Flank is bound to be bolstered by Sweden and Finland's pending accession to the Alliance. Yet, Canada has traditionally shown a limited interest in collaborating on Arctic security, instead pushing back against greater NATO involvement in the region. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's visit to Canada's Arctic in August

2022 was viewed by some as a show of support for Canada's "new" investments in NORAD modernization. Others saw it as a nudge for Canada to get its house in order, after nearly five decades of underspending.

Lack of security, defence, economic and human development innovation in the Arctic is a missed opportunity to play to Canada's natural strengths. Canada would do well to explain to allies that an investment in the Arctic security, kinetic and human, is also an investment in NATO. If NATO's North American pillar is not secure, then the credibility of US integrated deterrence is diminished, which weakens collective security across the entire alliance.

Evolving strategic landscape

Russia's revanchist ambitions have been on full display for years: Russia's full-scale war of choice against Ukraine is but another addition to a long list of aggression against neighbours, arguably starting with Moldova in 1990-1992, then expanding to Georgia (South Ossetia/Abkhazia) in 2008 and Ukraine's Crimea and Donbas regions starting in 2014. Russia is known to pursue external distractions from its socio-demographic, economic and political structural challenges, which have bedevilled its failed transformation after the collapse of the Soviet regime. Putin's war of choice in Ukraine will weaken Russia for the foreseeable future while exacerbating and accelerating its structural challenges. As a result, Russia may leverage the Arctic as a distraction in the same way it has with Ukraine and other former Soviet successor states.

Russian designs on the Arctic aside, a resurgent Communist China has been thriving on historical grievances against the West and revisionist narratives to underpin historically dubious claims about its rightful place in the world. China has made it clear that both poles are part of this aspiration, in particular the Arctic. Indeed, China has been engaging in significant disruptive activities, including economic and legal warfare, environmental malpractices such as marine pollution and overfishing, an expansive military presence around the world and technological innovation to project power into the world's polar regions.

Given the critical infrastructure, economic and political interdependence of North America's regional security complex, an adversary no longer needs to hit the US mainland to disrupt the structure of the alliance, notably NATO but also its continental subset, NORAD. In other words, both Russia and China have intent, opportunity, and capability to disrupt the status quo in the Arctic.

The Arctic theatre is ripe for disruption. Canada is ill-prepared for disruption on all fronts.

Evolving technology in the maritime and aerospace domains are changing the strategic calculus, particularly with advancements in hypersonic missiles and autonomous underwater vehicles. Russia is already leveraging in attempts to disrupt critical communications and pipeline infrastructure, while China has proclaimed itself a “near-Arctic state” and has developed growing maritime surface, subsurface and space capabilities to this end.

The nature of cooperation in the Arctic has also changed. With the pending succession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, all Arctic states will be in NATO – except Russia. Furthermore, nowhere in the world is climate change advancing as quickly and having as great an impact as in the polar regions, which makes the Arctic’s strategic landscape exponentially more dynamic.

Political challenges in the Canadian context

Developing the political will to improve Canada’s posture in the Arctic remains a fundamental challenge to policy innovation. Canada needs to adopt a proactive approach to shape the Arctic in concert with Canada’s Arctic allies and partners, as opposed to its reactive approach that fails to realize that adversaries now have the initiative in the region. Canada’s political and economic sovereignty is at stake, yet public and political awareness remains ignorant.

Most Canadians have never been to the Arctic and are unfamiliar with the region’s unique challenges. This leads to a profoundly misinformed imposition of southern approaches onto the North’s unique context. One example is the failure to appreciate the exponential cost of operations and transportation throughout the region, due to a lack of infrastructure, its vast expanse, and inhospitable climate and territory. At the same time, the Arctic remains an idealized part of national identity, which heightens an ill-informed political preoccupation over protecting Canadian sovereignty at the expense of greater bilateral and multilateral cooperation around Arctic security.

How Canada can step up

Earlier this year, on June 9, 2021, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin approved the initiative to establish the Ted Stevens Center (TSC) on Arctic Se-

curity. TSC is aligned as the regional studies centre of US Northern Command (US NORTHCOM), assigned to the US Department of Defense's (DoD) Office of the Secretary of Defense Policy, and has US European Command (USEUCOM) tasks as well. The US did so *unilaterally*, in response to the US *National Defense Authorization Act 2021*, as a result of Congressional action, which provided the basis for US DoD to proceed. *That* should be a wakeup call for Canada: neither Congress nor DoD invited Canada to partner bilaterally, let alone binationally, in its most important initiative on Arctic and continental defence and security in decades.

Save for the North American and Arctic Defence Security Network (NAADSN), which has funding for three years only and will expire presently, no Canadian university has a program that is focused on Arctic security. By contrast, the United States and Europe have been setting up multiple Arctic security centres and funding research chairs. Canada has thus far demurred on the TSC leadership's open invitation to both Global Affairs Canada and Canada's Department of National Defence to provide participation to join in it.

“ *Canada has preferred vague expressions of intent to host its first NATO Centre of Excellence..* ”

Instead of maximizing Canadian, binational and multilateral returns, Canada has preferred vague expressions of intent to host its first NATO Centre of Excellence – on climate security – and to take part in the North American pillar of NATO's Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA). These opportunities offer some promise to tie Arctic security more effectively into collective defence arrangements. But instead of concrete measures on Arctic security, Canada has largely pursued high-profile, repetitive pronouncements whose lack of substance is not lost on friends or adversaries alike. Case in point, in the summer of 2022, the Canadian government passed up opportunities with both Jens Stoltenberg and German Chancellor Scholz' visits to step up on defence cooperation and energy security.

Canada's inaction on Arctic security is bound to embolden adversaries. By standing idly by, Canada is failing to deter. In the process, Canada is inadvertently making the Arctic less secure, not just for us, but for our most important

strategic ally, the United States, as well as our European allies. Against a panoply of grey-zone dangers and hybrid warfare below the threshold of armed conflict by adversarial state actors, Canada continuing to demur until the status quo on the Arctic is no longer tenable: proliferating and accelerating threat vectors against the whole of Arctic, Northern and Canadian society require a whole-of-government approach.

While the federal government spins platitudes about upholding the international rules-based order, Canada's strategic ignorance and benign neglect in the Arctic are actively contributing to its deterioration. The Kingston dispensation of 1940, when Canada and the US decided to cooperate on threats against the continent, made North America the most secure, prosperous, and stable continent the world has ever known. As the Arctic approach poses the most immediate and direct threat to the North America continent, Arctic security is the ultimate litmus test of Canada's commitment to this bargain.

A less secure Canadian Arctic is necessarily also a less prosperous Canada, and a less democratic one – as it represents a failure to live up to Northern development and concomitant issues of human and environmental security. In other words, the government's failure on Arctic security also amounts to an abdication of responsibility for reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada's North, notably by investing in dual-use infrastructure, Indigenous resource development, human and energy security, and greater local and Canadian Armed Forces capacity in search and rescue, for example.

In the end, the government's current approach to Arctic security amounts to a scathing indictment of any sense of grand strategy. Since Canadian defence spending is unlikely to rise at a time when Canada has assumed major new commitments in Europe, Canada would do well to rethink new performative commitments in the Indo-Pacific theatre, such as those announced in the government's long-awaited Indo-Pacific Strategy. After all, why dispatch the Royal Canadian Navy to the Straits of Taiwan when the Chinese regime's 2018 Arctic Strategy is actively eyeing the Canadian Arctic!

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