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THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES AND THE ARCTIC: MAINTAINING A SUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE ROLE

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Due to its increasing accessibility resulting from climate change, the Arctic could become a contested and militarized arena in which states within the region and beyond attempt to secure and gain access to lucrative shipping routes and resources. Such an eventuality poses particular challenges to Canadian sovereignty and security. Stemming from such a characterization, the Harper government had long prioritized the Arctic as a defence issue, raising the spectre that Canadian sovereignty in the North could be irrevocably compromised – we either ‘use it or lose it.’

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While silent on which potential adversaries were threatening to usurp Canadian ownership, the Harper government sought to restore a military presence in the Arctic by “placing more boots on the Arctic tundra, more ships in the icy water and a better eye-in-the-sky.”¹ In his 2005 campaign, in particular, Harper promised a litany of Arctic-specific defence projects to rectify the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) dearth of presence and operational experience in the region.² The promotion of the ‘sovereignty at risk’ narrative seemed to justify the construction of a robust and permanent military presence in the Arctic. In reality, however, Canada requires a different type of military presence and capability suite than commonly perceived (or advocated).

Canada’s security challenges in the North do not emanate from a military threat but are rather largely constabulary in nature. Defending sovereignty is the perennial duty of the military but in the Arctic there is no credible, state-based threat capable of challenging Canadian ownership of its waters and territories, with a few exceptions which are well managed. Despite its sometimes fiery rhetoric, the former Conservative government’s various Arctic policy documents reflected such an appreciation of the threat environment.³ With the near absence of state-based threats, military requirement in the Arctic need to be suitable for this particular security environment and sustainable given the operating challenges of the region, as well as other competing military priorities.

At present, the military is focusing their Arctic efforts on increasing domain awareness via surveillance and maintaining a light regional footprint to facilitate Northern operations and, when required, support the deployment of southern based-units which are increasingly training in the North, often in conjunction with other security agencies and regional partners. Deploying large contingents of combat capable forces is ill-advised given the nature of the threat, prohibitively expensive given the harsh operating environment (especially the High Arctic), and potentially compromising other missions and mandates by drawing resources away.

The Arctic Security Environment⁴

With the end of the Cold War, the strategic importance of the Arctic diminished significantly allowing for the construction of regional forums dedicated towards common interests, specifically climate research. Rapidly changing environmental conditions, however, are transforming the Arctic landscape by increasing accessibility to human activity to an unprecedented level. Amongst this uncertainty, issues of ownership and access have fueled the development of a narrative of the Arctic as moving away from a politically stable region to one of high geopolitical importance characterized by growing complexity, competition, and perhaps even rivalry. In such a narrative, the current regional architecture is simply unable to adjust and accommodate the expected scramble for resources and political influence.

Not surprisingly, a popular theme has been the growing ‘militarization’ of the Arctic over the past decade. There is no denying that all Arctic states are augmenting their military capabilities in their northern territories, including the stationing of combat-capable units. As one commentator has remarked, “we may be entering the first stages of an Arctic arms race, in which competition and conflict may overwhelm our desires and rhetoric to have a cooperative regime for the developing circumpolar world.”⁵ The augmenting presence, capability development, and employment of military forces in the Arctic is an emerging reality, but their use is, by and large, within recognized national borders and waters. Moreover, they are largely focused on exercising sovereign control to ensure compliance with state laws, border control, and search and rescue. Retaining combat forces to defend against state-based threats in the Arctic is a marginal requirement at this time. Arctic countries are more concerned about increasing their domain awareness in parts of their jurisdictions characterized by large geographic areas, small and sparse populations, and a lack of infrastructure, surveillance, and response capacities.

The flurry of recent Russian military projects in the Arctic, including icebreaker construction and the re-activation of air and army bases on their northern islands, are in part aimed at establishing unquestioned ownership of the Northern Sea Route, regardless of legal objections by the US that the waters constitute an international strait. This is not to suggest that developing a war-fighting capacity in the Arctic is not an objective of Moscow. However, domestic political calculations and constabulary requirements have heavily shaped the makeup and operational nature of military developments thus far in the region.⁶ Some military developments in the Arctic, furthermore, are based on larger, extra-regional factors. Modernization of the Russian Northern Fleet, for instance, is designed to upgrade their nuclear submarine deterrent and for global operations. Similarly, the US ground-based interceptors in Alaska are meant to counter a missile attack from a rogue state, specifically North Korea.⁷

Most commentators are quick to assert that militarization is becoming a dominant force driving regional politics, but are at a loss in not only providing an operational definition (e.g., what does ‘militarization’ mean?) but also in explaining how this process will contribute to the destabilization of the region beyond simplistic narratives (Russia versus NATO; non-Arctic states versus Arctic states). There are no territorial disputes in the Arctic, with the exception of the relatively benign dispute over Hans Island between Canada and Denmark, and there is no evidence to suggest Rus-

sia or any other Arctic nation is moving to employ military forces over contested Extended Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) or to gain unobstructed access to polar shipping routes.

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Another central plank in arguments predicting a more adversarial and competitive Arctic region is that external agents, specifically Asian countries, will increasingly confront and contest the legitimacy and authority of the Arctic states in governing regional affairs. Of those external actors, China consumes the lion’s share of such analyses. As Beijing begins a more multi-faceted relationship with the region and its principal actors, there is a growing perception of China playing the long game by emphasizing its legitimacy as a stakeholder (despite the absence of Arctic geography) to establish a foothold in the regional governance structure. The spotting of a Chinese naval task group operating in the Bering Sea in the fall of 2015 exacerbated concerns that Beijing may begin to use its military in a more confrontational manner in the Arctic (and elsewhere) to further its interests.

Lack of specifics on how and why China constitutes a threat to the region are indicative that many of these commentaries are simply importing the more generalized (but still problematic) ‘Assertive China’ narratives that dominate Western views of Chinese foreign policy. China’s slowly growing interests and activities in the Arctic align within their broader foreign policy goals of diversifying energy and resources suppliers, securing trade routes, and becoming more active in global and regional governance instruments commensurate with their growing great power status and role. Contrary to portrayals of China as an assertive and bellicose outsider, Beijing’s actions have been conducted through legal and accepted channels, including participating, at a low and non-intrusive level, in the regional political architecture. China’s self-identification as a ‘Near Arctic State’ expresses their view that the region cannot be hermetically sealed by the Arctic states to others, including transit rights for international commerce, but there is very little evidence of Beijing becoming more aggressive in the conduct of their regional relations and no indication they would use military assets to further their Arctic pursuits.

The Arctic is also defined by a number of stabilizing elements and characteristics which effect the

behavior of the states operating within the region, including:

- *Balance of Power:* At a structural power level, the region includes the world's two nuclear superpowers whose deterrence relationship largely places a cap on their competitiveness. This condition is amplified by the fact that the Arctic includes both of their respective homelands. The other Arctic coastal states – Canada, Denmark and Norway – are members of the NATO alliance and thus well-insulated against attempts from any state-based threat under this security framework;
- *State Stability:* Arctic countries continue to tackle issues of sustainable development and the welfare of northern indigenous communities, but they are all developed and stable states with no civil wars or domestic unrest. Greenland is in the midst of gaining independence from Denmark – an entirely peaceful and well-defined political process of transition.
- *Institutionalism:* The Arctic Council, the pre-eminent organization in the region, has moved beyond a strictly decision-influencing body focused on climatic and environmental research to one with limited decision-making authority, as evidenced by the enactment of binding search and rescue (2011) and pollution response (2013) treaties. The inclusion of non-Arctic states into the Arctic Council has lessened the risks of denying entry to these influential entities by allowing them meaningful participation and legitimacy as involved stakeholders. Other forums have also been established to foster regional cooperation and engagement, specifically pertaining to security matters which are purposefully omitted from the Arctic Council's mandate. Recent examples include the 2015 creation of Arctic Coast Guard Forum and the 2013 Northern Defence Chiefs meeting (a Canadian initiative). Perhaps the most important development in regional cooperation to date was the 2008 Illussiat Declaration, in which the five Arctic coastal states pledged to resolve all maritime boundary disputes in accordance with international law.

The most important feature of the Arctic political regime is its adaptive and constantly evolving nature, and its success in building mechanisms to address a growing range of regional issues while making room for the inclusion of outside actors. Dismissal of the Arctic regime as ill-equipped to deal with a new geopolitical environment fails to understand its robustness. The Arctic is a stable region characterized by an ever evolving rule-bound regime of developed countries, and an absence of war and failed states.

Contrary to the absence of state-based security challenges, however, a number of incidents over the past several years have shown the weakness of constabulary entities in monitoring and enforcing

Canadian jurisdiction in the Arctic.⁸ Another concern is the impact on Search and Rescue (SAR) preparedness with increased shipping and air travel in and over the region. For example, commercial flights using the polar routes have grown from approximately 1,000 in 2003 to over 10,000 in 2010.⁹ As it pertains to the waterside, destination shipping is growing in Canadian waters, as exemplified by the recent voyage of the cruise ship *Crystal Serenity* – the largest cruise vessel yet to visit Canada’s Arctic – raising fears that a serious incident would most likely stress Canada’s SAR system to the breaking point.¹⁰ That said, it must be kept in mind that even with the rapid percentage growth in traffic in the Arctic,¹¹ these numbers still pale in comparisons to those of major air and marine arteries in the southern approaches of Canada. The accessibility of the Arctic to illegal and nefarious elements, also, must be taken into context of the Arctic landscape defined by a large

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land mass; an inhospitable environment for much of the year; sparse populations; and small towns and hamlets making any appearance of outsiders readily noticeable.

Current Military Arctic Posture/Next Steps¹²

Due to the lack of state-based threats, the CAF over the past decade has avoided building a large permanent presence in the Arctic and instead focused on adaptive and dispersed operations to assist the Government exercising effective control over the North by enforcing Canadian laws and regulations. To that end, the CAF’s primary missions in the Arctic are: conduct routine sovereignty patrols; work with Other Government Departments (OGDs); conduct regular surveillance and security patrols; monitor Northern airspace under the role of NORAD; Search and Rescue; and maintain signals intelligence from the Alert station.¹³

CAF operations in the Arctic are controlled by Joint Task Force North (JTFN) stationed in Yellowknife – one of six regional task forces responsible for domestic operations of all CAF assets in their area of operations. The Canadian Army and Royal Canadian Air Force maintain small deployments of assets in the region to assist in Search and Rescue and emergency response, and also have the capability to deploy larger, southern-based units – which are placing a growing emphasis on Arctic training – when required. The most important CAF asset on the ground are the Canadian Rangers, a subcomponent of the Reserves comprised of indigenous personnel which conduct year round sovereignty patrols. As the boots on the ground and most reliable eyes and ears in the North, they also serve a critical component of the CAF in maintaining domain awareness.

Of the three military services, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) has the smallest footprint in the Arctic with no ships deployed or based on a permanent basis. Ships from both naval bases periodi-

cally operate and exercise in the North, but they are too expensive and few in number for regular use. With the projected acquisition of the Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) beginning in 2018, the RCN will acquire a platform with more ability to operate in the North but not a year round presence due to lack of ice-breaking capability, limited range, and absence of deep-water ports and year-round refuelling stations.

In terms of surveillance, Canada's military maintains and operate a number of facilities in the Arctic to monitor traffic, including the North Warning System (NWS) comprised of a series of unmanned long- and mid-range radar stations and the Northern Watch program, a solely Canadian surveillance system located on Devon Island on the approaches into the Northwest Passage, designed to monitor both surface and sub-surface traffic. Canada has, also, deployed a number of satellites as part of the RADARSAT program to conduct regular imagery and reporting of the Arctic region in which the CAF, via the Polar Epsilon program, is able to retrieve relevant data. Additional satellites to augment coverage will be launched in 2018.

The CAF conducts three annual operations, all of which began in 2007, in various regions throughout the Arctic to demonstrate sovereignty and work with other federal agencies exercising inter-departmental capacities to respond to an array of security and safety scenarios. Of these, Operation *Nanook* is the largest with involvement from other government departments and international participants, including the US and Denmark and observers such as France and the UK. Beyond domestic operations, the CAF is regularly involved in multilateral Arctic exercises, the most prominent being Exercise *Cold Response* held annually in Norway involving a number of NATO allies and other participants.

Moving forward, the broad contours of the CAF's engagement and operations in the Arctic should remain the same. The Government should avoid calls to increase a permanent presence for the military in the Arctic as this will be prohibitory expensive and achieve little other than consuming resources. It must be always kept in mind, also, that the CAF is a small-sized military which does not have the luxury of regional specific assets but must employ them in a multitude of contexts and operational theatres. As it pertains to Arctic specific military developments, some issues for the Government to deliberate on include:

- *Surveillance*: the Government has recently announced the initial stages of engagement with industry for bids the Department of National Defence is calling the 'All Domain Situational Awareness Science and Technology Program' (ADSA) to improve the military's awareness of air, maritime surface and sub-surface approaches to Canada, and in particular those in the Arctic.¹⁴ The main considerations to keep in mind is that the current

NWS radars are well within Canadian territory and thus any new system must relocate surveillance stations to the frontiers of Canada's northern territorial borders to better track and monitor air and more importantly maritime traffic, the latter of which became part of NORAD's mandate in 2006. Second, there has been a revival by some quarters in Canada's defence and political communities to reconsider joining Washington's continental Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system, with reports the Pentagon has asked Ottawa to examine the possible acquisition of new radars capable of ballistic missile tracking to replace the NWS. While beyond the scope of this analysis, any discussion of including such technologies in future surveillance systems much take into account the Arctic context and expected reactions from regional partners, most importantly Russia.¹⁵

- *Infrastructure developments:* Canada has no deep water facilities or SAR hubs in the Arctic currently, although the opening of Nanisivik will provide a seasonal refuelling centre.¹⁶ Unlike Russia, however, Canada is not promoting the use of the Northwest Passage as a commercial transit corridor and thus has not developed a national strategy for building associated logistical, navigational, and SAR centres to support augmented traffic in the region. Nonetheless, increasing maritime and air traffic in the Canadian Arctic necessitates regular assessments of situating constabulary and SAR assets in the area as appropriate. It remains to be seen whether the CAF, specifically the RCN, needs a port or station but such a requirement could be justified for the Canadian Coast Guard and the RCMP which operate in the region year round.
- *Canadian Rangers:* As the Trudeau government explores expansion of the Canadian Rangers, it is important to understand what the Rangers are and are not, and why. The Rangers in the Arctic are the local experts in survival skills and predator control, and as such they are force enablers allowing other regular and reserve military units to conduct operations, including if needed combat. Attempts to expand the Rangers in scope to acquire a combat capacity risks undermining the social-cultural uniqueness of the organization and how they fit in Canada's overall Arctic strategy. As these members, furthermore, will never be deployed overseas and the likelihood of having to combat an armed aggressor in the Arctic is slim to none, there is no operational rationale towards this approach. Investigating the possibility of maritime patrols is feasible but again the Rangers are not combat or constabulary forces and as such any increase in size or scope should not deviate from their core missions of surveillance, sovereignty patrols, and force enablers to the CAF and other government agencies.¹⁷
- *AOPS:* Originally designed with the primary purpose of Arctic operations, with the retire-

ment of the Kingston-Class vessels in the next decade and no replacement ships scheduled, it is not unreasonable to expect the AOPS fleet to assume these coastal and patrol duties in a variety of theatres throughout North America. These developments have led some to claim the AOPS may, therefore, be a compromised asset with capabilities ill-suited for either Arctic operations (due to limited range and ice-breaking capability) as well as continental patrols (due to slow speeds and fueling consumption rates).¹⁸ The acquisition of the AOPS platform at first glance tentatively signals the inclusion of Canada's third coast as part of routine naval operations, but based on its capabilities and other changes to the Fleet, these vessels will most likely (perhaps extensively) be employed in other operational theatres.

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Conclusion: Situating Arctic Military Matters in Defence Policy

The mandate, operational focus, and lines of capability development for the Arctic should by and large remain the same as it was under the previous Conservative government, specifically:

- Maintain a light military footprint to support operations in the area, such as regular sovereignty patrols, as well as serve as command and control capacities when southern units are deployed;
- Sustaining and increasing investment in surveillance technologies to enable better responses to a spectrum of non-state security challenges from strategically placed assets; and
- Increased training (including in regional exercises) and operations, not permanent stationing, for southern units to gain exposure and experience of operating in the North.

The military’s involvement in the Arctic must be suitable given the threat and operating environment, as well as being sustainable in light of the high costs and challenges associated with maintaining forces and capabilities of any size in the region. Exercising sovereignty is the real and immediate challenge in the Arctic. The CAF continues to develop robust and efficient relations with other security agencies in the North but focusing on military developments may detract from investing in those agencies better situated from a mandate and experience level to exercise sovereignty in the Arctic. Anxieties over sovereignty should not dominate the Arctic security discourse; if so, by default the military will be seen as the appropriate state instrument to deal with what are largely constabulary rather than defence matters.

The Arctic is a stable and rule-bound region with no existential threat at present to Canadian sovereignty or security interests. The government should continue to support intra-regional military cooperation and exercises, as well as adequately explaining and justifying military developments to ensure the region does not become dominated by a military-security discourse focused on relative comparisons of power. As Joel Sokolsky and Joseph Jockel note,¹⁹ policy-makers must avoid the tendency to frame every military issue as an emerging threat unacceptably compromising Canadian peace, prosperity, and stability (which it usually is not) and thus demanding increased prioritization and resourcing. The Arctic will be an arena in which geopolitical competition will unfold but this is part of a larger international phenomenon of power reconfigurations away from US hegemony. In many respects, the Arctic is perhaps the region best suited to mitigate the excesses of such developments.²⁰

As such, the defence review should mention the role of the CAF in the Arctic as part of their primary mandate of defending Canada (and North America), but acknowledging that we reside in a relatively benign state-based threat security environment and thus the focus should be on better methods and practices of exercising more so than defending sovereignty. Within that mandate, the CAF has a role to play but not necessarily the primary one, especially to the detriment of Canada's other security agencies.

About the Author

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Notes

1. "Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future: Canada's Northern Strategy," Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2009, p. 9.
2. These defence promises included establishing an Arctic training centre; procuring 3 armed icebreakers; a fully operational deep-water fuelling station; expansion of the Canadian Rangers to 5,000 members; and annual military sovereignty operations.
3. These documents include "Canada's Northern Strategy: Our North, Our Heritage, Our future" (2009) and "Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy: Exercising Sovereignty and Promoting Canada's Northern Strategy Abroad" (2011). As the latter document concludes, there is no military challenges in the Arctic and outstanding maritime disputes are well-managed and do not threaten Canadian interests.
4. This section draws heavily on a recent piece I contributed to *Frontline Defence*: Adam MacDonald, "Arctic Politics: From Stable to Scramble," *Frontline Defence* 13, 2 (2016), <http://defence.frontlineonline.com/article/2016/2/4357-Arctic-Politics>.
5. Rob Huebert, quoted in The Honourable Pamela Wallin, Chair, and The Honourable Romeo Dallaire, Co-Chair, "Sovereignty and Security in Canada's Arctic: An Interim Report," Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence, March 2011, p. 25.
6. The robust development of a military presence in Russia's Arctic, however, is not by itself enabling Moscow to achieve its strategic objectives in the region – objectives that revolve around exploiting its resource potential and encouraging the use of the Northern Sea Route as an international shipping lane. Lack of progress on these fronts is not due to sovereign challenges but the absence of international partners following the imposition of western sanctions following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. As a result, Moscow is orienting its efforts towards China to secure capital and support in their Arctic projects but problems over mutual respect and trust are complicating this growing relationship. Ekaterina Kilmenko, "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy: Drivers, Challenges and New Opportunities," *Policy Paper* No. 42 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, September 2014).
7. Adam MacDonald, "The Militarization of the Arctic: Emerging Reality, Exaggeration, and Distraction," *Canadian Military Journal* 15, 3 (Summer 2015): pp. 18-28.
8. Nancy Teeple, "A Brief History of Intrusions Into Arctic Waters," *Canadian Army Journal* 12, 3 (Winter 2001): pp. 45-68.
9. "Operation Nanook," National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, 28 August 2015, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-canada-north-america-recurring/op-nanook.page>.
10. "Arctic Rescue Fears Loom as Massive Cruise Ship Prepares to Sail Northwest Passage," *CBC News*, 3 April 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/cruise-ships-safety-northwest-passage-1.3518712>.
11. "The Integrated Arctic Corridors Framework," *The PEW Charitable Trust*, April 2016, p. 6.
12. For a comprehensive overview of CAF Arctic developments see: Adam Lajeunesse, "The Canadian Armed Forces and the Arctic: Purpose, Capabilities and Requirements," *Policy Paper* (Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, May 2015).
13. "Joint Task Force North," National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, 11 December 2015, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-regional-jtf-north/jtf-north.page>
14. "Defending the Arctic: New Security Network in the Works as World Powers Turn North," *Global News*, 13 April 2016, <http://globalnews.ca/news/2624287/defending-the-arctic-new-security-network-in-the-works-as-world-powers-turn-north/>.
15. Lee Berthiaume, "Liberals Reopen Debate 11 Years After Martin Government Opted Not to Join U.S. Ballistic Missile Defence," *The National Post*, 17 April 2016, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadian-politics/liberals-reopen-debate-11-years-after-martin-government-opted-not-to-join-u-s-ballistic-missile-defence>. Ballistic Missile Defence is an issue in which the primary rationale for joining is that Canada needs a seat at the table with the United States more so than any detailed discussion on the effectiveness of the system and whether it actually will increase Canadian and continental security, particularly given the poor test results over the past eight years. Joining BMD, therefore, could result in major resource allocation for Canada in terms of research and development which should be taken into account in any decision.
16. The Nanisivik refueling station is not projected to be open until 2018 and will only be used seasonally with no capacity to house large amounts of stores or personnel – significant reductions in capability than initially envisioned by the former Harper government. These reductions, furthermore, are largely due to high building costs and the suitability of the site, demonstrating the difficulties associated with building any sort of permanent

infrastructure in the region. Beth Brown, "Nanisivik Analysis," Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia, 16 February 2016.

17. Whitney Lackenbauer, "If It Ain't Broke, Don't Break It: Expanding and Enhancing the Canadian Rangers," *Arctic Net*, Working Papers on Arctic Security No. 6, March 2013.
18. Michael Byers and Stewart Webb, *Titanic Blunder: Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ships on Course for Disaster* (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Rideau Institute, April 2013).
19. Joel Sokolsky and Joseph Jockel, "A Defence Review? Not Really Necessary: But if Canada Necessarily Must, Here Are Some Things to Keep in Mind and to Avoid," *CDA Institute Analysis*, April 2016.
20. This is best exemplified by the fact that the degradation of Russia-NATO relations since Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 has for the most part not migrated into the Arctic and seriously affected or disrupted regional relations to any great extent, especially when compared to other regions.

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