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NATO, Canada and the Arctic

by **Andrea Charron**
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NATO SERIES

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Canada's latest defence policy, *Strong, Secure Engaged*,¹ contains a small paragraph that may signal a change in long-held Canadian defence practice. In the past, Canada eschewed NATO exercises in its Arctic as too provocative for its Russian neighbour. Rather, individual NATO partners, like Denmark and the U.S., have been invited on a bilateral basis to participate in exercises such as Op Nanook in Canada's Arctic. The paragraph in the new defence policy opens the possibility for a NATO exercise in the future. The question becomes: is such a change advisable when relations between Russia and NATO allies are still tense?

On the one hand, five of the eight Arctic states² are NATO members and so exercises in the European Arctic involving them are not new. Indeed, Norway will be hosting Trident Juncture 2018 – NATO's high-visibility exercise in which “tens of thousands of soldiers are expected to participate ...” beginning in October.³ The eight Arctic states (which include Russia) have formed an Arctic Coast Guard Forum which has also just had its first live exercise – Arctic Guardian – in Reykjavik, Iceland this September. While NATO has no agreed position when it comes to its Arctic role, the Nordic states have lobbied for NATO to be more present. Certainly, the number of articles warning of the dangers of an undefended GIUK gap (the maritime boundaries between Greenland, Iceland and the U.K., which Russia's Northern Fleet must transit to reach the North Atlantic) is on the rise. The concern is that NATO-allied anti-submarine warfare has atrophied, calling into question the transatlantic resolve.⁴

On the other hand, Canada has tried to discourage overt, visible NATO participation in the North American Arctic. At the 2009 NATO Strasbourg/Kehl Summit, member states were poised to release a statement on NATO's role in the Arctic as part of the final declaration. Canada demurred and because of NATO's consensus-based decision-making, a muted paragraph was released reading: “Developments in the High North have generated increased international attention. We welcome the initiative of Iceland in hosting a NATO Seminar and raising the interest of Allies in safety and security-related developments in the High North, including climate change.”⁵

Point 110 in Canada's new defence policy, suggesting Canada will “[c]onduct joint exercises with Arctic allies and partners and support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO”, is curious. If it is simply information sharing among NATO allies, this is the status quo. The NORAD maritime common operating picture (COP), which includes a snapshot of the North American Arctic, is a combination of a Canadian COP, the U.S. COP and allied information. All states can benefit from better and all-domain awareness, and sharing of such information is always advisable to have a more complete understanding of the vessels of interest in the Arctic Ocean. Ideally, information directly from

¹ Government of Canada, *Strong, Secure Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (June 2017) Found at <http://dgaapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>

² Finland, Russia and Sweden are not NATO members.

³ See <https://forsvaret.no/en/exercise-and-operations/exercises/nato-exercise-2018>

⁴ Google “NATO and the GIUK gap” and you will be presented with 46,000+ results.

⁵ NATO, Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration (2009). See para 60. Found at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_52837.htm?mode=pressrelease



Russia, including its underwater movements, should be included for a truly complete Arctic maritime common operating picture. For now, this is not possible for a number of geopolitical reasons.

If, however, rather than bilateral or trilateral exercises with allies (who just happen to be NATO members), exercises in Canada's Arctic become NATO exercises, this is a change that Russia would likely interpret – whether for its domestic audience only or its wider defence policy – as provocation given the proximity of Russia's and North America's Arctic territories. And given that the Arctic is a region where progress has been made in many different issue areas thanks to the Arctic Council, hosting NATO exercises in order to host NATO exercises in the Canadian Arctic could upset this progress. As Russia is the largest and most important Arctic actor, is there benefit to be gained from such a change in policy? Perhaps more helpful would be a reinvigoration of the Arctic Chiefs of Defence meetings involving the eight Arctic states, which could start with issues concerning military support to search-and-rescue. Arctic discussions are also possible within the context of the NATO-Russia Council. This is not coddling Russia nor does it excuse Russian actions in Ukraine and Syria. Rather, it recognizes that Russia has the most to lose should the Arctic become conflict-ridden, that Russia is key to ensuring that international law in this region prevails and that Russia is crucial to solving many other issues of concern for NATO including North Korea.

Clearly, NATO members are interested in understanding some of the challenges of the North American Arctic – especially the effect of climate change on infrastructure. A group of nearly 30 NATO parliamentarians (a subcommittee on transatlantic economic relations and a science and technology committee) from Bulgaria, Italy, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, France, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey (six of which represent Arctic Council observer states) are just now starting a tour of Canada's Arctic. They are being briefed by key Canadian government officials and taking a tour of Yellowknife and Resolute. Sharing information about Canada's Arctic, especially reminding others that it is first and foremost a homeland, is always a propitious opportunity which Canada should seize. NATO exercises in Canada's Arctic, however, may not be prudent for now.

► **About the Author**

Dr. Andrea Charron holds a PhD from the Royal Military College of Canada (Department of War Studies). She obtained a Masters in International Relations from Webster University, Leiden, The Netherlands, a Master's of Public Administration from Dalhousie University and a Bachelor of Science (Honours) from Queen's University. Her research and teaching areas include NORAD, the Arctic, foreign and defence policy and sanctions. She serves on the DND's Defence Advisory Board and has published in numerous peer-reviewed journals. Dr. Charron worked for various federal departments including the Privy Council Office in the Security and Intelligence Secretariat and Canada's Revenue Agency. She is now Director of the University of Manitoba's Centre for Defence and Security Studies and Assistant Professor in Political Studies.

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