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by Joël Plouffe et al.
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Described as a resource-rich region with the potential of attracting commercial activity, the Arctic is often perceived as a region that is prime for conflict. There are unresolved boundary issues, an assertive Russian Federation determined to benefit from its own northern development, and global powers such as China and the European Union (EU) are closely following Arctic politics and economic development. These issues and others have continued to frame policy debates around how the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) should adjust to defend Canada's national interests in a rapidly changing Arctic security environment.

In 2008, the Department of National Defence (DND) released the Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS) in which the changing Arctic took a prominent place. As stated by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, "sovereignty and security challenges will become more pressing as the impact of climate change leads to enhanced activity throughout the region. The defence of Canada's sovereignty and the protection of territorial integrity in the Arctic remains a top priority for the government." Consequently, the CFDS noted that the CAF "must have the capacity to exercise control over and defend Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic" through greater surveillance and an increased military presence in the region.¹ However, the CFDS left vague the precise nature of the emergent threat for Canada's northern coast.

Then and now, Canada appears to be lacking a "clearly-defined" state enemy to its national security in the Arctic.² The Defence Policy Review should therefore be observant of that reality.

THE ARCTIC IS NOT ON THE VERGE OF WAR

Over the past decade, critical analysis has continued to challenge the erroneous belief that Canada's national security is threatened in the Arctic. Unlike the fear-mongering narrative warning of increased interstate tensions in the region, Canadian scholars and military experts alike share the view that "there is currently no military threat to Canada in the Arctic."³

Mutually Beneficial Cooperation

All Arctic states dismiss the assumption, which has been made by the media, that thawing sea ice, triggering a so-called 'race' to newly discovered natural resources, has any significant implication for conventional national defence policy development. They have also often repeated that any longstanding boundary disputes or issues related to extended continental shelves will be resolved peacefully and in consistency with bilateral/international legal arrangements.⁴

As we commemorate two decades of uninterrupted multinational cooperation among all of the Arctic states – primarily through the Arctic Council which was founded in 1996 – regional institutions and governance tools continue to multiply. The most recent developments are the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (2015/2016) and the Declaration on Arctic Fisheries (2015). These institutions are beneficial for all Arctic states since they renew a regional environment of continued dialogue based on growing interconnected military and economic interests. They are also the foundation of confidence-building measures that shape Arctic affairs.

Misrepresenting Russia

Russia has been attracting a lot of attention around its renewed interest in its Arctic zone. Indeed, Russia's preeminence in the changing Arctic has generated fears about whether Moscow's actions in the region (and elsewhere such as in Ukraine or Syria) are indicative of a more belligerent Russia potentially threatening the cooperative status of circumpolar relations.⁵



A number of events have elevated suspicion about Moscow's foreign policy, including: the Russian flag-planting stunt at the North Pole in 2007; the ongoing modernization of Russia's military capabilities (with some destined for Russian Arctic territory); the recent post-Soviet Arctic exercises; the immense (albeit legal) Russian UNCLOS continental shelf claim; and, most of all, the increasing of long-range bomber flights in the North American Arctic (international) airspace.

While Russia is expanding its activities in its Arctic, there is no credible scenario in which Russia could represent a state threat to Canada's sovereignty and security in the region. Russia's Arctic region is the most populated, has the longest coastline and is equipped with the largest icebreaking fleet in the world (nuclear or diesel propelled). It has the biggest year-round ice-free port/city in the entire circumpolar north (Murmansk), has led the most Arctic manoeuvres, and has made command of its North a top domestic and foreign policy objective and priority.⁶ Nevertheless, its interest toward Arctic security and development is based on a changing Russian Arctic in a globalized world that ultimately requires a renewed approach to safety and security.⁷

Expanding Safety and Security in the North

The 'unconventional' nature of national security issues in the Arctic has been established many times since the end of the Cold War. As a result of climate change, the non-traditional security and safety challenges are part of a broader and comprehensive definition of Arctic security that include: "search and rescue (SAR), major transportation disasters, pandemics, loss of essential services (e.g. potable water, power, and fuel supplies), organized crime, foreign state or non-state intelligence gathering activities, attacks on critical infrastructure, food security, and disruptions to local hunting and transportation practices caused by shipping or resource development."⁸

In Canada, these are complex and costly problems to manage and will require preparation and intervention by DND/CAF in cooperation with other departments and agencies. They demand a whole-of-government framework that entails policy planning that will support, enable and enhance Canada's all-domain situation awareness.⁹



DND



COMMON NORTH AMERICAN ARCTIC CHALLENGES

The United States, Canada's Arctic neighbour and closest military ally through NORAD and other bilateral institutions, also considers that the most realistic challenges that it will face in the Arctic are and will remain unconventional in nature.

While climate change is in the process of transforming the Arctic into a blue-water ocean, US government documents have frequently asserted that the level of military threat in the region is expected to remain low for the foreseeable future.¹⁰ Therefore updating the strategy of the US Department of Defense (DOD) will require balancing "the risks of having inadequate capabilities or insufficient capacity when required to operate in the region with the cost of making premature or unnecessary investments" in a time of important fiscal restraint.¹¹ Bilateral cooperation with Canada therefore becomes even more relevant in such similar situations.

The DOD's Arctic strategy is based on three postulates. The first one is the non-conflictual nature of Arctic geopolitics driven by diplomatic initiatives to resolve new and/or existing disputes through international institutions, frameworks or various collaborative mechanisms.

Second, in Washington's view Russia is a key partner of the United States in the Arctic and needs to be at the table to discuss and develop "policies to cope with changing conditions in the Arctic."¹²

Finally, the US Navy is of the opinion that human activity in the North American Arctic will remain limited by the "uncertainty around the pace of climate change and commercial activity," meaning that DOD will need to "mitigate the risk by monitoring the changing Arctic conditions to determine the appropriate timing for future capability investments."¹³

While DOD assumes that human activity in the region will "increase gradually and unevenly," it has also asserted that hazardous conditions will continue to hinder maritime navigation in the North American Arctic waters, notably through the Northwest Passage.¹⁴ In that perspective, DOD has established that current American infrastructure in the Arctic "is adequate to meet near- (present-2020) and mid-term (2020-2030)" defence requirements.¹⁵

Of importance to Canada, DOD warns "that being too aggressive in addressing anticipated future security risks may create the conditions for mistrust and miscommunication under which such risks could materialize or lead to an 'arms race' mentality that could lead to a breakdown of existing cooperative approaches to shared challenges."¹⁶ In that context, DOD sees its future role in the Arctic as being supportive of other federal agencies in the region, and similar to Canada's whole-of-government approach, responding to unconventional security and safety challenges in the near future.

THE WAY AHEAD FOR CANADA

Over the past decade, the Canadian Armed Forces have developed capabilities for their missions in the North after years of neglect. In that perspective, we believe that DND should consider the following six recommendations for the Arctic dimension of the defence and foreign policy redesign.



First, DND should *improve the CAF's supporting role for the activities of other federal government departments and agencies to promote and reinforce northern communities and their safety and emancipation, and enhance public service delivery in the North*. This would include maintaining relations with northerners, research and development, improving operational logistics in case of natural disasters or accidents, enforcing law and order, assisting delivery of services from other governmental departments, etc. This recommendation is reflective of the CAF's expanding role as the most capable responder in the North. It can also facilitate the federal government's role in addressing emerging social, political and economic issues, and it insures a governmental presence in the Arctic that strengthens stewardship and effective sovereignty. As well, it maximizes returns on prior costly investments, and it ultimately supports the CAF's role as a 'leading from behind' supporting actor in the Canadian Arctic.

Second, Canada should *stop the aggressive rhetoric on Arctic politics and cease referring to the redundant 'protecting Canada's sovereignty' axiom*. This type of narrative tends to obscure the real and complex issues of governing the Canadian Arctic and the challenges of circumpolar politics in general. It increases the fears of Canadians and bewilders outside observers who struggle to understand Canada's apprehension. The traditional sovereignty-obsessed narrative coupled with the Arctic fear-mongering (e.g., 'the Russian threat') does more damage than good to Canada's identity and international reputation.

Third, *achieving the CAF's expanding responsibilities in the Arctic requires that Ottawa maintain the present course of capital construction programs*. In addition to those programs that are already in the works (i.e., deep water port, Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships), Canada must continue to expand and update its air, surface and sub-surface surveillance capabilities in the face of growing unconventional safety and security demands. Moreover, DND should also maintain its annual CAF Arctic exercises that enhance northern expertise in DND in general. It would be a mistake for Canada to go back to the 1990s when the CAF and Canadians were deprived of the opportunity to acquire such knowledge.

Fourth, *it is imperative for Canada to maintain and deepen its circumpolar relations with its Arctic allies*, particularly by implementing the Agreement on Cooperation and Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic, and through joint military exercises (bilateral and multilateral), including Russia. Canada can benefit from its role in becoming a leader that promotes Arctic stability, enhanced cooperation through multinational governance and development that is mutually beneficial to all state and sub-state actors involved, especially northerners. Despite the tensions created by Moscow's involvement in the Ukrainian crisis, the Canadian government must strive to maintain diplomatic relations with Russia in the Arctic as a key ally for national security. Therefore, Canada has a vested interest in strengthening regional relationships on defence cooperation (e.g., burden sharing, joint operations) and promoting the renewal of dialogue on circumpolar issues of mutual interest, including the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff Meeting, suspended due to the Ukrainian conflict. This process would lead to establishing confidence-building measures that contribute to stability.

Fifth, *the Canada-US bilateral military relationship in the Arctic requires special attention*, not only because Washington is Ottawa's principal partner on continental defence, but also because of two outstanding legal disputes: the Northwest Passage (NWP); and the international boundary in the Beaufort Sea. Canada should approach these issues in two ways:



- Avoid reigniting the political or legal debates over the status of the NWP. The government should avoid the unfounded fear-mongering around Canada's (in)ability to control its northern waters. Rather, it would be constructive to maintain the cooperative spirit of the agreement between Canada and the United States on cooperation in the Arctic of 1988, and the US-Canada Joint Statement on Climate, Energy and Arctic Leadership of March 2016.
- Canada's policy towards the United States in the Arctic should seek to deepen the process of institutionalization of that bilateral relationship, a feature of the Canada-US military relationship that is long overdue for expanding. The 2012 Tri-Command Framework for Cooperation in the Arctic was a step forward in regional military cooperation in a time of increasing security and safety challenges in the North. Another way to expand military cooperation in the Arctic could be to form a northern-specific committee inspired by that of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) or the Military Cooperation Committee that would be responsible to study the problems and challenges in the North, and submit recommendations to both governments.

Sixth, adopting a policy that avoids resurrecting the NWP disagreement does not mean that the Trudeau government should espouse a passive attitude towards the United States on this issue. Rather, *Canada should seek to reinforce its position on the NWP* in two ways. First, the government should consider how it realistically intends to plan, in the near term, the development of the NWP. Should it foster an approach founded on maintaining the status quo with the United States? Should it adopt a laissez-faire approach that encourages local communities and the private sector to facilitate and lead the development, or a more proactive approach that seeks to establish infrastructure and develop initiatives that direct the operations of the NWP? What type of governance structure does Canada need for the NWP in a 15- to 20-year timeframe? Second, Canada must approach the administration of the NWP as if the challenge to its legal claim were tenuous. This implies that in particular Canada must engage in activities that ensure a regular presence in those waters, and the establishment of a specific regulatory framework. In both cases, DND can play a catalyst role on the issue by initiating a whole-of-government reflection on these two NWP-driven policy options.



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¹ Department of National Defence, Canada, Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS), 2008, p. 8, available at http://www.forces.gc.ca/assets/FORCES_Internet/docs/en/about/CFDS-SDCD-eng.pdf.

² Whitney P. Lackenbauer and Adam Lajeunesse, "The Canadian Armed Forces in the Arctic: Building Appropriate Capabilities," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2016), pp. 25, 26.

³ House of Commons, Standing Committee on National Defence, (22 March, 2016), available at <http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=e&Mode=1&Parl=42&Ses=1&DocId=8166596>.

⁴ In particular, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLOS-CLCS).

⁵ On the Arctic conflict narrative, particularly dealing with Russian national interests in the region, see Robert Murray (2016, May 16). "Do Not Oversell the Russian Threat in the Arctic." War on the Rocks. Retrieved May 16 2016 from <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/do-not-oversell-the-russian-threat-in-the-arctic/>.

⁶ Andrea Charron, Joël Plouffe and Stéphane Roussel, "The Russian Arctic Hegemon: Foreign Policy Implications for Canada," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2012), p. 38.

⁷ Ekaterina Klimenko (2016). "Russia's Arctic Security Policy: Still Quiet in the High North? SIPRI Policy Paper No. 45. Stockholm, Sweden. 48p.

⁸ Lackenbauer and Lajeunesse, "The Canadian Armed Forces in the Arctic," p. 61.

⁹ Ernie Regehr (2014, February 3). "Arctic Maritime Domain Situation Awareness." The Simons Foundation Policy Paper. Retrieved June 12 2016 from

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¹⁰ See White House, National Strategy for the Arctic Region, 2013; Department of Defense (DOD), Arctic Strategy, 2013; and Chief of Naval Operations, US Navy, Arctic Roadmap for 2014-2030, 2014, available at http://www.navy.mil/docs/USN_arctic_roadmap.pdf.

¹¹ United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Arctic Planning. DOD Expects a Supporting Role to Other Federal Agencies and has Efforts Under Way to Address Capability Needs and Update Plans," *Report to Congressional Committees*. GAO-15-566, (June 2015), p. 1. Available online at: <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-566>.

¹² Ronald O'Rourke, "Changes in the Arctic: Background Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service (CRS), 21 May 2016, p. 54, available at <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41153.pdf>.

¹³ GAO, "Arctic Planning," p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁵ US Navy, Arctic Roadmap.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

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