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by Lindsay Rodman
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

THE PENTAGON'S ARCTIC STRATEGIES REVEAL THE BENEFIT OF A NORTH AMERICAN APPROACH

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Over the past year or two, and for the first time since the Cold War, the American defence establishment has begun to appreciate the Arctic's significance. Noticing a problem, however, is not the same as solving it. Much like Canada, the United States has not been able to articulate a holistic vision of what it hopes to accomplish in the Arctic.

Canada's 2019 [Arctic Policy Framework](#) raises some age-old questions about Canadian capability and capacity to maintain peace and security in the Arctic. Unfortunately, most commentators were underwhelmed with what came out of the document. The [2017 Defence Policy Review](#), which produced a similar reaction from onlookers on the question of Arctic security, also provides limited guidance.

The United States' overarching strategic documents are similar in that they are more descriptive than prescriptive. Although the Pentagon has produced two Arctic strategies since 2016, both focus more on describing the regional security environment than on advocating for specific policies. The warming of the Arctic – which has implications for important U.S. interests – demands a new strategy that is unafraid to take positions and make difficult tradeoffs.

Ultimately, a North American Arctic strategy is necessary. Only co-operation between the United States and Canada can achieve a holistic, integrated and inter-operable defence of the continent. A bilateral approach has the potential to address capacity problems facing both countries and could force a conversation about the way forward.

The Arctic Context

Though the United States is an Arctic nation, it has been noticeably absent from the region as a leader (for the past few decades, at least). This American absenteeism stands in stark contrast to the United States' involvement in other regions, even where it does not hold territory.

The United States showed slightly more interest last spring, when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [attended the Arctic Council Ministerial](#) meeting, issued "[stern warnings](#)" to Russia and China, and called Canadian claims in the Northwest Passage "illegitimate." The key disagreement between the American delegation and others at the meeting relates to views on climate change.

Pompeo's clumsy remarks revealed an American interest in being more proactive in the Arctic without a thorough understanding of the region's needs and norms. With Canada's vast territory and experience in the Arctic, a Canadian-American partnership could be fruitful. There is a strong history of strategic collaboration in the North between the two countries dating back to the DEW line and the North Warning System – a bilateral Arctic security strategy would not be a huge stretch. For Canada, an understanding of U.S. thinking on the Arctic thus far informs how Canada would come to the table in such a joint venture.



The Pentagon's Arctic Strategy

The Trump administration has released two Arctic defence strategies, one dated 2016 (but released in 2017) and the second in early 2019. The [December 2016 strategy](#) was notable for what it did not say: it promised no additional resources nor high prioritization for Arctic issues. Instead, the strategy discussed working with partners and allies to mitigate gaps where Washington is not prioritizing Arctic issues.

In 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense published [a new Arctic strategy](#) after [Congress required an update to the 2016 version](#). While early sections of the strategy do a good job of contextualizing the region and providing a threat assessment, the ways and means portions of the document avoid committing the Defense Department to any specific actions. The end of the document includes service-level updates that articulate the status quo, but do not reposition any of the services to treat the Arctic differently.

The 2019 strategy also places a stronger emphasis on deterrence and great power competition, but still lacks any commitment to resourcing, except that it specifically commits to not trying to keep pace with Russia's military build-up in the Arctic. The strategy does commit to much-needed enhanced surveillance and monitoring efforts. The strategy also cites cold weather training – an improvement to tactical readiness and proficiency, but hardly a strategic objective – as a potential benefit of participation in Arctic exercises.

The Defense Department strategy and service leadership speaking on Arctic issues all emphasize roughly similar points:

- The warming Arctic is bringing more commercial activity;
- Russia is building up forces but so far, they are behaving defensively;
- China's investment presence and growing interest in the Arctic is concerning; and
- The United States relies on allies and partners in the region to help address all three of the above issues.

These points are all valid. However, the United States has never satisfied itself with relying completely upon partners and allies in great power competition. The United States will usually articulate its leadership as counterbalancing other powers, even when relying on the help of partners and allies. Meanwhile, U.S. partners and allies look to the United States hoping that it can help supplement their resource limitations as well. For Canada, this indicates a potential opening. The Arctic is a unique region where the United States might be willing to contemplate a truly joint venture.

Some of the American resource deficits are more important than others. The Department of Defense is rightly focused on surveillance and monitoring. The dirty little secret of the Arctic is that we do not really know what is happening up there. Canada only recently [launched satellites](#)



and expanded the [Canadian Air Defence Identification Zone](#) to enable the possibility of surveilling of the entire country. Even so, Canada's new [Arctic Policy Framework](#) does not commit to funding full surveillance of the North American Arctic. The U.S. Coast Guard also readily admits that it has [limited ability to cover the entire Alaskan Coast](#). Going it alone so far has left both countries incapable of securing their own territory.

As with most strategies, the Pentagon's Arctic strategy leaves implementation to the services and the combatant commands. Thus far, there has been little to no realignment at a strategic level. U.S. Northern Command and U.S. European Command (and arguably, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command) each have [responsibility for part of the Arctic](#). Despite being required by the 2016 strategy to resolve potential gaps, it does not appear that a specific realignment or gap assessment has occurred. The services instead have been taking the lead.

Marine Corps

The most well-known U.S. military investment in the Arctic is the rotational presence of two marine corps companies in Norway, which began in 2017. Though they are technically stationed below the Arctic, their proximity to the Norwegian-Russian border makes their presence strategically noteworthy.

Russia is displeased with the marine corps' presence, calling it an "[attack](#)" and a Norwegian betrayal of a long-standing promise not to permanently station foreign troops on their soil. The ability to pique Russian ire demonstrates the outsized geopolitical impact these 700 marines have been able to garner, merely through their presence.

Gen. Robert Neller, the recently retired commandant of the marine corps, made sparse comments about the rotational presence, but his few remarks focused on [the value of cold-weather training](#). If [cold-weather training](#) were the ultimate goal, the marine corps could remain within the United States and not trigger the geopolitical ramifications and logistical headache of rotating marines through a foreign country. Two major results of this rotational presence – reassuring NATO and the Norwegians that the marine corps is investing in their security and disrupting Russia's sense of security in the region – are the noteworthy strategic benefits of the rotational presence.

Navy and Coast Guard

The U.S. Navy and the U.S. Coast Guard are the only two services that have their own written Arctic strategies. The [navy's strategy](#) is simultaneously unambitious (aspiring to a "flexible, periodic presence" in the Arctic) and potentially aggressive due to its citing of the potential for freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in the region. Asked whether the navy had the resources to execute the Pentagon's Arctic strategy, the Government Accountability Office [reached](#) the underwhelming conclusion that since the strategy identifies the region as "low risk" for conflict, the maritime resources committed to the region are adequate to meet the strategy.

Rather than take a deliberate approach to expanding capability, the secretary of the navy announced in January that he [wanted to send surface ships into the Arctic](#) to improve their ability



to navigate in cold environments, an ostensibly tactical justification for Arctic exercises. Then he added they might pursue [freedom of navigation operations in the Arctic this summer](#).

Freedom of navigation operations could only mean one of two things: challenging Russia's or Canada's claims to territorial seas in the Arctic. The last time the United States attempted FONOPS near Russia, [shots were nearly fired](#). After Washington attempted FONOPS near Canada, [resolution was required at the level of the president and the prime minister](#). Challenging Canada is silly; challenging Russia would be dangerous. Challenging neither may now seem weak. What started as a potential tactical exercise in improving proficiency has now become a strategic question of will-they-or-won't-they for the U.S. Navy. Ultimate resolution through greater collaboration is an option for both the United States and Canada to consider.

The most strategic investments for the navy are [new icebreakers](#), coming online in about five years. These ships are sorely needed and will be operated by the U.S. Coast Guard despite being funded through the navy (the [Polar Security Cutter program](#) is a joint project of the navy and coast guard). Russia's military presence in the Arctic outpaces the United States and Canada in nearly every dimension, but the most often cited example is [icebreakers](#). The U.S. arguably has two right now while Russia has over 40, with more coming on line each year. This joint procurement for the navy and coast guard is essential to enable the latter to perform its mission domestically, and it will also enable credible future statements about things like FONOPS, which now seem fanciful. Now is the time for Canada to invest in an interdependent relationship, which would compel both the United States and Canada to commit to understanding each other, while strengthening North America against any potential threat from Russia.

Submarines are the key to strategic Arctic dominance. Russia's Northern Fleet, headquartered on the Kola Peninsula near the Norwegian border, is the strategic threat in the region. The navy's Second Fleet is [charged with countering this threat](#) in the North Atlantic and the Arctic, but curiously Second Fleet gets no mention in the navy's strategy (nor do submarines, except for a mention of ICEX, a biannual exercise involving some ice-capable submarines).

The coast guard's own arctic strategy is a rewrite of a 2013 strategy (the only one of its kind at the time among the U.S. services). Vice-Admiral Daniel Abel recently commented that the [new strategy was necessary](#) because Arctic conditions have changed so substantially in the past few years. The coast guard is the U.S. service with the most sustained Arctic operational expertise, and is severely under-resourced. The coast guard, perhaps more than any other service, relies on international co-operation and institutions, which is reflected in its strategy. Above all else, the coast guard's newest strategy focuses more on making a case for the federal government to prioritize much-needed resourcing of the coast guard than it does on the coast guard's own strategic vision. Co-operation between the Canadian and American coast guards is already high. Encouraging an overarching strategic architecture could only strengthen such co-operation.

Air Force

For the first time, NORAD is starting to address the Arctic as a potential target in itself, rather than as merely the airspace through which Russian planes and missiles might travel toward the



lower 48 states. Though one wonders about possible scenarios for targeting the Arctic as greater commercial activity and populations increase in the region, and a need for defence and security. Nevertheless, the Arctic's relevance and importance for the air force (and for the United States writ large) has long been as airspace through which Russia would approach – either with aircraft or missiles.

Since the Cold War, the U.S. Air Force has taken the lead on protecting the United States from Russian threats, and aside from the coast guard, it has the most consistent interaction with Russia, in the form of intercepts of Russian planes. And, like the other services, there are [gaps in the air force's cold weather capability](#). An [op-ed in January 2019](#) by the outgoing secretary of the air force and the air force chief of staff highlighted the need to think strategically about the Arctic – a point that the Pentagon appears to be behind on. Air defence, missile defence and air power projection will all be essential components of a robust Arctic strategy. Despite these facts, the air force does not yet have an Arctic strategy, though it is clearly [paying attention to the region](#) (and may have a strategy [in the works](#)).

Army

The army's Arctic focus has, perhaps rightly, been on operational requirements of the Alaska National Guard and cold weather training. Cold weather training is most useful for increasing readiness to fight in places other than the Arctic (land battles in/near Russia, China or Korea) than it is a strategic tool for the Arctic. Recent scholarship from the Army War College cites the potential uses of [increasing army presence in the Arctic for human security reasons](#), but human security issues are likely better addressed by non-uniformed actors. Moving bodies to Alaska by itself likely takes them away from potential fights, other training or deployments, which are most likely to occur near the European Arctic/North Atlantic. Focusing on these operational concerns may actually undermine strategic objectives, depending on how they are defined. Canada's approach to the Arctic is also mostly operational. Through greater co-operation and collaboration, especially on human security issues, both countries could also push each other to resolve any strategic considerations that might arise.

Looking for Strategic Vision, not Strategic Description

A lot of thought is coming out of the U.S. services and the Defense Department on the Arctic. For now, the strategies coming out of the military are descriptive rather than normative. The Pentagon has defined the problem, but that's all. DoD depicts the emerging complexities in the region, but there are notable gaps on how to address them or in providing a vision of the region for the future.

The Pentagon should be showing, not telling, the world that it is thinking strategically about the Arctic. Rather than insist that it is thinking strategically, and then merely reciting the list of strategic considerations in the Arctic, the Defense Department could do more to showcase seriousness about the Arctic. Canada similarly has struggled with planning for the way forward, which is the next step required after extensive problem definition and consultation.



Funding icebreakers and rotating marines through Norway, as stated above, are two key signals that the United States is contemplating greater investment in Arctic security. However, these are just a start. One wonders whether these are the only two exceptions that prove the notion that the Arctic is still mostly being overlooked strategically. Ultimately, both Canada and the United States need a reason to focus on this issue, and to drive outcomes that benefit North America as a whole.

An Arctic strategy should answer the core strategic issues affecting U.S. and Canadian interests. For example:

- What prioritization has DoD given to much needed surveillance, indications and warnings resources?
- What is the plan for strategic use of submarines? Undersea warfare would play a prominent role in any Arctic conflict with Russia. Currently, the U.S. Navy's strategy does not address submarines.
- How does the navy's reactivation in 2018 of 2nd Fleet, which now has a renewed mission in the North Atlantic, inform the Arctic strategy?
- Are the army and marine corps actually planning to fight a land war in the Arctic? Is there a potential indication for amphibious capability?
- What is the future of the ballistic missile defence program, which is largely located in the Arctic?
- Are our space capabilities able to overcome the challenges of operating at the poles?
- Is there an indication for greater air patrolling in the Arctic?
- What is, and should be, NATO's role in the Arctic, and how reliant do we truly plan to be on our alliances for Arctic security? How does Arctic security interact with North Atlantic security?

Both the U.S. and Canada are nearly there: problem definition is often the toughest part of strategy development. Nevertheless, more work is required to produce a coherent strategy and approach to the Arctic that will adequately address its many emerging challenges. A bilateral approach to these questions will serve as a much-needed force-multiplier for both countries.

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