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## STRONG SECURE AND ENGAGED IN THE ARCTIC?

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**JCSP 44**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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## **STRONG SECURE AND ENGAGED IN THE ARCTIC?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The high Arctic has long been a place where only a few brave souls ventured and where economic development has historically been so costly it was unsustainable. It has also been a barren buffer zone between the East and the West. Climate change and global warming have brought about endless economic development opportunities and simultaneously created significant security and defense concerns in the Arctic. Many countries have identified these opportunities and concerns and have adopted policies and postured to benefit from a more accessible North while simultaneously adding to the complexities of the great game. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the growing interest of various actors in the North and show that Canada, by way of its new defense policy, Strong Secure and Engaged (SSE), is on the right track to meet these growing concerns. This paper will begin by listing two key assumptions pertaining to the North, climate change and the abundance of natural resources. Next, it will take an in depth look at Russia interests. It will examine its economic and military developments in the North to show its increasing interests. Then it will illustrate a few key friction points in the international community that may lead to conflict. The focus of this paper will then shift to examine other actors with interest in the North, including non-Arctic states such as China, tourists, and commercial exploration companies. All further illustrating the growing global interests in the North. Once this paper has proven an increasing interest in the North by Russia and others, it will examine SSE and show how the policy is on the right track to position the CAF and Canada to address growing concerns.

## SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE NORTH

In order to set the stage for the analysis to follow it is important to quickly summarize some key environmental factors that are at play when discussing the Arctic both in terms of economic development and security and defense. The purpose of this section is not to prove or disprove the various schools of thought on the issues rather it is to identify the generally accepted data concerning resources and climate change as it relates to the Arctic. As will be discussed later, and as a baseline for this paper it is generally accepted that the Arctic is bountiful in terms of natural resources. There are numerous resources including precious metals, fresh water, fish and other wildlife, and oil and gas. Estimates from the US Geological Survey indicate “that 30 percent of the world’s undiscovered natural gas reserves and 13 percent of the globe’s oil reserves [are] located in the Arctic” and that a significant portion of these oil and gas resources are in Russian declared regions.<sup>1</sup> The survey also postulates given the Arctic’s vastness that there could potentially be many other undiscovered oil reserves.

The second key factor this paper wishes to identify and establish as fact and as a baseline is that the Arctic environment is changing. Specifically, that the amount of ice in the Arctic on an annual basis is decreasing. There is much debate about climate change, global warming and their causes. This paper accepts as fact that access to the high North is increasing as the amount of seasonal ice reduces yearly. It agrees that “current scientific studies of the rate of melting anticipating a summer ice-free Arctic in the mid–2020s to 2030s” are correct.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas E. Rotnem, "Putin's Arctic Strategy: Collaboration Or Conflict After Ukraine?" *Problems of Post-Communism* 65, no. 1 (2018), 1. p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> P. Whitney Lackenbauer and University of Calgary. Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, *Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security: Historical Perspectives*, Vol. 2011 no. 4; no. 4 (2011) (Calgary, Alta: Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, University of Calgary, 2011). p. 5.

There are numerous other factors that are highly relevant to the North but the aforementioned factors are the most relevant with regards to the aim and scope of this work. These factors also represent the primary interests of most nations with interests in the North including Russia.

## **RUSSIAN INTERESTS IN THE ARCTIC**

Among the many nations with growing interests' in the Arctic, Russia is certainly the country that draws the most attention. Arguably the world's greatest Arctic power, Russia has in many ways shown its increasing interest in the Arctic by way of its national policies, military exercises and northern capability development. The following section of this paper will examine some of these noteworthy developments as well as some important contextual factors that must be considered.

Russia's increasing interests in northern development are top driven. Its national policies are explicitly expressed in two main documents, *The fundamentals of State policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic in the period up to 2020 and beyond* released in 2008, and in 2009 the *Russian National Security Strategy*. The interpretation of these documents is highly contested between two schools. The first school contends that Russia's policies are indicative of cooperation and development between Arctic states while the second school's position is more closely aligned to the realist viewpoint, focusing on Russian military activity and economic interest as self-serving and in the pursuit of power. This paper will not endorse either camp, rather it will highlight key Russian activities with a view to illustrating that despite Russia's true intentions, its actions cannot be dismissed as cooperation, nor overblown as aggression. As such, the CAF should proceed with caution in its approach but be prepare for the worst case scenario.

There are numerous factors that lead to pacific interpretations of Russian Arctic Policy. Chief among them are Russian economic interests. As stated earlier, the North represents significant economic opportunities for many nations. Russia has and continues to contribute sizable financial contributions to economic development in the Arctic. Some estimates assert that “as much as 20 per cent of Russia’s gross domestic product (GDP) and 22 per cent of the total Russian export is generated north of the Arctic Circle” and that the “total value of mineral resources in Russia’s North exceeds US\$22.4 trillion USD”<sup>3</sup> Committed to development in the coming years Rosneft, a Russian state-owned gas company, “planned to spend a total of \$400 billion in Arctic offshore fields over the next twenty years.”<sup>4</sup> Like so many other nations, Russia has sought to secure what lies beneath the ice and snow by submitting its claim to the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Limits of the Continental shelf in 2001.<sup>5</sup> Given the gross magnitude of the continued investment in the North it is understandable to accept and believe Russian policy as cooperative and based on global economic development in the North. However, it is equally important not to underestimate or miscalculate potential retaliation should Russian investment be threatened by anyone, least of all the West. With so much invested in the North Russia arguably will go to great lengths to secure its interests.

Russia’s investment in the North is not limited to economic investment. Russia has also invested a great deal in the construction of new, and the restoration of Soviet era airfields,

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<sup>3</sup> Andrea Charron, Joël Plouffe and Stéphane Roussel, "The Russian Arctic Hegemon: Foreign Policy Implications for Canada," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 18, no. 1 (2012), 38-50.

<sup>4</sup> Rotnem, "Putin's Arctic Strategy: Collaboration Or Conflict After Ukraine?" , 1, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

military installations and deep water ports.<sup>6</sup> One of the key challenges to operations in Arctic conditions is sustainment. It is very difficult to sustain operations with the limited resources in the extremely challenging northern climate. With functioning airfields, hangers, and infrastructure Russia increases its ability to project forces and power in the North. Although many believe this development to be in order to support and sustain economic growth there is undoubtedly military advantages associated with the aforementioned improvements.

In addition to investment in Arctic infrastructure, Russia has also significantly increased its military footprint and activity north of 60. To begin, Russian has positioned considerable forces in the North and has created four new Arctic Brigade Combat Teams.<sup>7</sup> Also, it has spent considerable amounts modernizing and winterizing existing equipment and fleets. Russian overflights with Bear H, strategic bombers, have resumed in the North which garners a great deal of attention from other nations particularly Canada and United States. Finally, to coordinate all this military activity Russia has stood up a Northern Command.<sup>8</sup>

The last few years have seen a significant increase in the size and scale of Russian military operations. In addition to the strategic overflights there has been an increase in military exercises in the North. In 2015, Russian conducted a very large exercise consisting of “80 000 soldiers, 65 warships, 220 aircrafts, in addition to putting the complete Northern Fleet on combat readiness.”<sup>9</sup> This exercise was only one of many. Although these exercises do not pose a

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Osborn, Putin's Russia in biggest Arctic military push since Soviet fall, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-arctic-insight/putins-russia-in-biggest-arctic-military-push-since-soviet-fall-idUSKBN15E0W0>

<sup>7</sup> Robbie Gramer, Here's What Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic Looks Like, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/25/heres-what-russias-military-build-up-in-the-arctic-looks-like-trump-oil-military-high-north-infographic-map/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

significant or immediate threat to Canada or the United States at present, they pose a threat to neighboring states and regional stability. Also, they show Russia's desire to exert sovereignty and protect their interests in the North.

Russia has heavily invested in economic and military infrastructure, has stationed thousands of soldiers and assigned naval assets to the North, and has drastically increased military operations. What does this all mean? In short, it shows Russia's increasing interest in the North. Although total war between super powers in the Arctic Circle may be unlikely, miscalculations at the political strategic level can lead to conflict and as such Canada needs to be prepared to respond accordingly. This will be examined in a later section but first let's look at some possibilities that could lead to conflict.

As mentioned above, Russia has submitted a claim to the U.N. regarding its Arctic shelf, as did several other states. A possible future conflict could arise should the U.N.'s decision regarding the Russian claim not be satisfactory to Russia. Experts in the field argue that Russia's northern aspirations have been economic and collaborative and that recent Russian aggression in Georgia and Crimea are not indicative of their northern strategy. Given Russian activity in Crimea, defending strategic assets and national interests by force, it is equally likely that Russia will defend any challenge to its northern assets or sovereignty with force. Also, given recent deteriorating relations between the US and Russia and President Putin's rhetoric is plausible that "Russia's behavior in the Arctic over the next decade and beyond will be shaped by its great power aspirations, its relationship with other great powers both in the Arctic and outside of it and the resources available to the Russian state to support its Arctic ambitions."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Michael L. Roi, "Russia: The Greatest Arctic Power?" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 23, no. 4 (2010), 551-573., p. 551.

The situation in the Arctic is very complex with various states vying for resources, transit rights, power, and deterrence among many other things. Political miscalculations could also provide the spark that ignites hostilities in the North or for Northern resources. A recent “re-emphasis on collective defense”<sup>11</sup> by Norway could provide such a spark or other similar actions by regional players could set Russia on a course similar to its annexation of Crimea if its position is threatened. Norway has been “the most vocal in its support for a more active NATO in the High North, going as far as to suggest that the Alliance was in danger of neglecting its primary duty of territorial self-defense”.<sup>12</sup> Such calls undoubtedly will not sit well with Russia, constantly watchful of NATO expansion. Many American and Russian exercises have coincidentally conducted very shortly after one another. Often Russian deployments would come shortly after NATO exercises, likely to demonstrate their capabilities and counter any NATO or Western influence in the area.

Long has the North been a buffer zone between two great nuclear superpowers. With the changing climate and accessibility to the region “Russian military analysts do not exclude the possibility that the USA could permanently deploy a nuclear submarine fleet and sea-based ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems in the Arctic Ocean.”<sup>13</sup> By this logic Russian interests and nuclear strike capabilities would be challenged, offsetting the power balance and threatening Russia. There are no definite signs of an arms race in the North but with the economic, environmental and military discourse surrounding Northern affairs, conflicts in or because of the North are not to be dismissed.

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<sup>11</sup> Lackenbauer, Whitney. Huebert, Rob. Dean, Ryan, *(Re) Conceptualizing Arctic Security* &nbsp; *Selected Articles from the Journal of Military and Security Studies*, 2017),. p. 28

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Sergunin and Valery Konyshov, "Russian Military Strategies in the Arctic: Change Or Continuity?" *European Security* 26, no. 2 (2017), 171., p 173.

It is evident that Russia has substantial interest in the Arctic. Its investment in economic development and military capability development are clear signs. As various states pursue their own interests there is an increased probability of a political strategic level miscalculation could result in conflict. As such, Canada's defense of its own borders, North America, and its engagements around the world must take into account the changing Arctic environment. In the third section of this paper we will examine some key GoC and CAF investments and how they address the changing environment.

## **OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES**

There are increasingly actors other than those that form the Arctic Council with interests in the North. Such parties include but are not limited to China, India, Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Italy. All the aforementioned states were added to the Arctic Council under observer status in May of 2013. Many of these states have shown growing interests in North, conducting bilateral agreements with Arctic states for various reasons including to secure economic deals, access to resources, and influence decision making pertaining to Arctic affairs.<sup>14</sup> Although they are not voting members of the Arctic Council their ability to influence must not be ignored especially with regards to China. As the world's population increases and resources become scarcer the various and increasing amount of parties with interest in the Arctic will add to the complexities of international negotiations in northern affairs. Further, as the global warming further takes its toll it is reasonable to assume more states will seek access to fleeting resources thus complicating matters even more. All this to say that Canada must consider the changing

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<sup>14</sup> Kevin Xie, "Some BRICS in the Arctic: Developing Powers Look North," *Harvard International Review* 36, no. 3 (2015), 60. p. 60-63.

environment, the actors involved, and perhaps the possibility that current collaboration amongst states on Arctic development, security and resources is subject to change as new actors enter the scene.

There are also increasing corporate and private interest in the North as it becomes more accessible. A further increase in individual adventurers, thrill seekers, and tourist should also be expected as the terrain becomes more navigable. The most notable example is the transit of the North West Passage by the Crystal Serenity cruise ship. Also, increasingly as the ice melts merchant fishing vessels will seek to cash in on the opportunity. The presence of tourists, cruise ships, and fishing vessels represent a new set of challenges for Canada. The matter of policing, security, search and rescue, and environmental disasters become more and more likely as activity in the North increases. The following section will examine some of these key issues and how the CAF is planning to mitigate potential future issues as stated in its most recent defense policy.

## **CAF IN THE NORTH**

The primary sources used to assess Canada's response to the changing Arctic Environment are SSE and various public engagements by key GoC officials regarding the North. The overall evaluation this paper puts forth is that CAF's response to the changing environment is adequate given the current situation. However, as discussed above pertaining to Russia, there disposition and capabilities are not to be taken lightly.

The first and most important indicator that the CAF is responding appropriately to the changing environment can be seen in its new approach to defense, "Anticipate, Adapt, Act." This new approach and understanding that "the Arctic region represents an important international

crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security meet” set the CAF up for success. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, it is quite difficult to solve a growing problem if it has not yet been identified and the policy rightfully identifies the problem and SSE does that and more.

Another key indicator that CAF’s response is adequate and on the right track is its renewed commitment to naval assets. The policy calls for recapitalization of 15 surface combatant ships and the purchase of several new Arctic Offshore Patrol Vessels, specifically designed to operate in the North. The policy also calls for increased, training, reach and deployment capabilities for Rangers as well as increased joint northern exercises with allies.

Further, the policy calls for the acquisition of unmanned surveillance platforms as well as new early warning systems in the North to fulfill our NATO commitments. As discussed earlier, with the increase in Russian activity and increased interest by various other actors it is significant that the CAF has prioritized its commitments to NORAD and Arctic security. It shows it understands and is aware of the global trend and in line with its commitment to be secure in North America.

The abovementioned initiatives are only a few of many that indicate the CAF and the GoC understands the changing environment. The purpose of this section was not to scrutinize in exhausting detail SSE but rather illustrate that the CAF is on the right track. The procurement of new fighter jets has seen significant delays but the key takeaway is that the policy identifies the requirements and Canada is taking the right steps to acquire new aircraft in order to surveil and defend the North America. There are countless other requirements too with regards to Arctic security that are omitted in the policy that could be raised ranging from shortages in personnel,

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<sup>15</sup> Canada. Dept. of National Defence and Canada. Ministère de la défense nationale, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa, Ont.: National Defence = Défense nationale,[2017]).

infrastructure, and search and rescue capabilities in the North. The policy does not address every concern but makes the major commitments with aircraft, naval vessels, and collaboration to secure the North in accordance with the current threat.

Political leadership in Canada also plays a role in with regards to defense and Arctic policy. Prime Minister Harper was very visible in his support for military operation in the North. He believed sovereignty was largely based on troops and boats and planes in the Arctic. As such numerous northern exercises such as Operation Nanook were front and center with Harper on the front page. The current government on the other hand is not so visible with regards to military operations and photo ops in the North but seems as committed to Arctic defense. Firstly, the defense policy was approved and designed under a liberal government. Also, the Trudeau regime has announced the creation of a new Arctic Strategy as well as the creation of a new Ministry of Indigenous and Northern Affairs.<sup>16</sup> Trudeau has not been as visible in the Arctic as Harper however he seems to be pushing for a whole of government approach. Given his announcement in collaboration with President Obama banning offshore drilling he seems to genuinely concern himself with the environment and the people vice the security and financial aspects of Northern development.<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The following paper has displayed that there is increasing interest by various states and non-state actors in the North. Russia, being the most concerning given its military capabilities in

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<sup>16</sup> Government of Canada, *Toward a new Arctic Policy Framework*, <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1499951681722/1499951703370>.

<sup>17</sup> Hinchey, Garrett, *Trudeau defends Arctic drilling ban, talks economic development at Yellowknife town hall*, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/prime-minister-justin-trudeau-yellowknife-1.3975229>.

the North is the most imminent threat but certainly not the only concern. With increased activity in the North from commercial fishing vessels, tourists, and cargo ships comes increased responsibility for Canada and the CAF to address. SSE is adequate to address the threat and concerns as they currently stand however it would be unwise to assume the status quo will remain indefinitely. As the Arctic becomes more and more accessible the concerns and complexity will only increase.

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