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THE ARCTIC COUNCIL AND MILITARY SECURITY : TIME TO TALK

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Exercise Solo Flight

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INTRODUCTION

Security of the Arctic region, and the role of military forces in it, is a topic often skirted or addressed only peripherally by the various organizations that and agreements that contribute to Arctic governance. The Arctic Council,¹ having made significant contributions to cooperation in other areas of importance in the Arctic, does not directly address issues involving military provision of security. On its website, the Arctic Council points out, “The Arctic Council’s mandate, as articulated in the Ottawa Declaration, explicitly excludes military security.”² Additionally, the five member states³ of the Arctic Council that are also members of NATO make an effort to distance the collective security organization from their Arctic activities. For years, analysts and academics have advocated the status quo, insisting that military security discussions should continue to remain outside of the Arctic Council. However, this paper will argue that the Arctic nations must not only acknowledge, but also formally address the presence and use of military forces in the Arctic and that the Arctic Council is an appropriate means to do so, especially given its track record of successful dialogue and cooperation among nations. Militaries are involved in the Arctic already, and military capabilities have enabled and will continue to enable the Arctic Council’s stated aims.

This paper will look at present attitudes towards addressing the topic of military involvement in the Arctic. Consideration will be given to addressing military security

¹Canada, Denmark, Greenland (Denmark), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States of America – in addition to 6 observer members representing Arctic indigenous groups

²“The Arctic Council: A Backgrounder,” online: <https://arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/working-groups/33-about-us>, accessed 17 May 19.

³Not NATO members: Sweden, Finland, Russia.

within the Arctic Council as the most appropriate forum for such discussions and to the reasons that NATO is not an appropriate forum for this discourse. And finally, this paper will argue that these discussions need to occur because there is already significant military activity underway in the Arctic, underscoring the need for a mechanism to discuss these activities with Russia before regional disagreements or misunderstandings occur and to allow nations to explain their rationale for military activity, rather than risk turning the use of military security forces in the Arctic into a series of incidents designed for one-upmanship.

DISCUSSION – THE ARCTIC COUNCIL AND NATO

According to its website, “The Arctic Council is the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, . . . in particular on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection.”⁴ While military defence is specifically excluded from the its founding principles, safety and security issues are included the Council’s scope of activity.⁵ For over two decades, this categorization of the Arctic Council has served it well. However, the present geopolitical climate in which tensions between Russia and the West are growing, especially since Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, and taking on an increasing strategic-military orientation, it is time to revisit the issue of military defence in the context of the Arctic Council, by leveraging the polite diplomacy and cooperation that has typically been

⁴The Arctic Council: A Backgrounder,” online.

⁵P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Adam Lajeunesse, *The Emerging Arctic Security Environment: Putting the Military in its (Whole of Government) Place* in P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Heather Nichol, Eds, *Whole of Government Through an Arctic Lens*. Antigonish: Publications Unit, Mulroney Institute of Government, 2017, p. 22.

observed in the Council's discussions and activities. Among the challenges of addressing military security through the Arctic Council is that Russia is a member of the council and also an adversary of many of the other member states, and in particular an adversary of NATO, to which 5 Arctic Council member states belong. The idea that bringing the discussion of military security into the Arctic Council as a means to engaging Russia in dialogue to pre-empt future friction or tension among Arctic Council members may not seem like a realistic goal in the resent geopolitical climate; however, it would be significantly less provocative than seeking a more robust formally stated role for NATO in the Arctic. As Adam MacDonald points out, as the Arctic's littoral states continue to find ways to justify their employment of military forces in the Arctic, "it is the lack of clarity regarding Russia's geopolitical perception which generates the most concern."⁶ This statement demonstrates a clear need to address military activities in the Arctic openly and transparently. In this context, discussion meant to inform Russia's perception without emphasizing existing friction might best occur within the Arctic Council.

The NATO-Russia Council was established in 2002 as a forum for dialogue and information exchange on the basis of reciprocity, and to reduce misunderstanding and increase predictability. However, although token meetings have occurred in the intervening years, no practical cooperation between NATO and Russia has occurred under the umbrella of this organization since Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine, deemed by NATO to be a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁷ As

⁶Adam MacDonald, "The Militarization of the Arctic: Emerging Reality, Exaggeration, and Distraction," in *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol 15, No 3, Kingston: Canadian Army Publishing, 2015, p. 24.

⁷North American Treaty Organization website, "NATO-Russia Council." Online: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm, updated 25 Jan 19, accessed 14 May 19.

a result of this already damaged NATO-Russia relationship within the NATO-Russia Council, it is not an appropriate forum for open discussions regarding military security forces in the Arctic. Similarly, discussions within the wider NATO context are also unlikely to be effective.

Although several of the Arctic Council member states are also members of NATO, For many years, formal NATO exercises in the Arctic were avoided for fear of provoking Russia,⁸ In fact, NATO does not have an agreed-upon position on an Arctic role for the collective security organization, despite the fact that the Nordic states have lobbied for increased NATO presence there. Among their arguments for an increased NATO presence in the Arctic is the potential future need to secure the maritime boundaries between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom against Russia's navy.⁹ Arctic exercises have occurred among allies, who happened to be NATO members, although they were not labelled or acknowledged to be NATO exercises, again to avoid provoking Russia.¹⁰ Despite membership on the Arctic Council, Russia is remains an irregularity in the context of military cooperation in the Arctic. As other Arctic nations increasingly work together, care is taken to avoid potential interpretations of that cooperation as part of an international NATO strategy.¹¹ Both the United States and Russia have Arctic-specific defence policies,¹² signaling that both nations envision a distinct defence role for their military forces in the Arctic. However,

⁸Andrea Charron, "NATO, Canada and the Arctic" Calgary: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2017, p. 1.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 2.

¹¹MacDonald, "The Militarization of the Arctic," p. 24.

¹²Ibid., p. 19.

Canada in particular should address the issue of military forces in the Arctic. With the real potential that a variety of routes¹³ through the Arctic will eventually open up, there is an argument to be made that Canada will need to employ a whole-of-government approach¹⁴ to manage increased traffic and presence in the Arctic. This approach must and will include Canada's armed forces. While the primary or immediate role of armed forces in this scenario would not be aggressive security enforcement, a military presence is absolutely necessary to support the myriad activities performed by other organizations and departments in support of the whole-of-government approach to Arctic activities.¹⁵ Dr Andrea Charron, in analyzing Canada's latest defence policy finds this suggestion within it curious: Canada will conduct "joint exercises with Arctic allies and partners and support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO."¹⁶ Dr Charron notes that this brief statement may be a signal that Canada is prepared to step away from its long-held avoidance of NATO participation in the Arctic.¹⁷ In the meantime, Canada already conducts three annual operations throughout the Arctic region to demonstrate sovereignty and exercise, along with other federal departments, responses to a variety of security and safety scenarios.¹⁸

¹³North West Passage, the Northern Sea Route and the Transpolar Route

¹⁴Also referred to as "a comprehensive approach."

¹⁵P. Whitney Lackenbauer, and Heather Nichol, Eds, *Whole of Government Through an Arctic Lens*, Antigonish: Publications Unit, Mulroney Institute of Government, 2017, p. i.

¹⁶Charron, "NATO, Canada and the Arctic," p. 1, and Government of Canada, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (June 2017), online <http://publications.gc.ca>, accessed 4 11 May 19, Point 110.

¹⁷Charron, "NATO, Canada and the Arctic," p. 1.

¹⁸Adam MacDonald, "The Canadian Armed Forces and the Arctic: Maintaining a Suitable and Sustainable Role," Ottawa: CDA Institute, 2016, p. 6.

DISCUSSION – MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN THE ARCTIC

Despite the fact that both the Arctic Council and NATO have avoided addressing Arctic security issues in any concrete or direct way, the member states of both organizations are already using military forces in Arctic operations. Each of the five Arctic littoral states¹⁹ have increased their Arctic presence, capability development, and employment of military forces in the Arctic.²⁰ In 2012, the Arctic Council reached an agreement for closer cooperation to deal with disaster responses and search and rescue operations in the Arctic. The agreement was reached at a meeting of all eight the member nations' chiefs of defence,²¹ including Russia, suggesting that each nation depends heavily on its defence forces to support of conduct the task of search and rescue on its behalf. Canadian Forces Station Alert, located in the Arctic and operated by Canadian Armed Forces personnel, maintains High Frequency and Direction Finding facilities that support search and rescue operations.²² Similarly, the same eight nations have also formed an Arctic Coast Guard Forum which has held live exercises.²³ Coast Guards in the Arctic perform military or para-military tasks in the region, including search and rescue, enforcing regulations, and responding to emergencies.²⁴

¹⁹Arctic littoral states: Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States of America

²⁰MacDonald, "The Militarization of the Arctic," p. 18.

²¹Ian Livermore, "From Cold War to North Pole Alliance: Canada and the Changing Face of Defence and Foreign Relations in the Arctic," in P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Heather Nichol, Eds. *Whole of Government Through an Arctic Lens*, Antigonish: Publications Unit, Mulroney Institute of Government, 2017, p. 52.

²²Ernie Regher and Michelle Jacket, *Circumpolar Military Facilities of the Arctic Five*, Vancouver: The Simons Foundation, 2017, p. 9.

²³Charron, "NATO, Canada and the Arctic," p. 1.

²⁴Ragnhild Groenning, "Why military security should be kept out of the Arctic Council," for the Center for Circumpolar Security Studies, Washington: The Arctic Institute, 2016, Online www.thearcticinstitute.org, accessed 9 May 2019.

Additional Arctic issues addressed by the Council include increasing economic activity, shipping, mapping and surveying, indigenous communities, and climate change.²⁵ It is anticipated that military stations established in the Arctic could be used also as logistics or transportation hubs, or in support of shipping.²⁶ As Adam MacDonald points out, “The presence of military forces does not in and of itself necessarily signal a shift to more adversarial approaches in diplomacy.”²⁷ At the same time, however, it must be recognized that the military forces of every nation in the arctic are fully trained and combat capable. No matter what specific task they are fulfilling or supporting, they are capable of quickly transitioning to offensive or even defensive security operations should it become required or desired.

Denmark acknowledges the importance of the Arctic in its national defence agreement and also has a joint military Arctic Command headquartered in Greenland.²⁸ Norway’s security policies are strongly focused on Russia and on other potential conflicting interests in the Arctic region. In 2009, Norway moved the headquarters of its armed forces from the southern part of the country to just north of the Arctic Circle, with an army headquarters even further north. Norway regularly participates in a series of “Arctic Challenge” military exercises along with NATO, Swedish, and Finnish forces.²⁹ Interestingly, Arctic security concerns represent only a minor role in the United States’

²⁵MacDonald, “The Militarization of the Arctic,” p. 26.

²⁶Ibid., p. 27.

²⁷Ibid., p. 18.

²⁸Siemon T. Wezeman, “Military Capabilities in the Arctic: A New Cold War in the High North?” Solna: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Background Paper, 2016, p. 7.

²⁹Ibid. pp. 10-11.

overall defence policy. However, the United States maintains military bases in Alaska, and three of the US combatant commands have responsibilities in the Arctic.³⁰

Russia, too, has increased military activity in the Arctic, making the region a military priority, even while it remains unclear how exactly Russia intends to incorporate and utilize its increasing military power there.³¹ Russian Arctic policy documents highlight the importance of cooperation among Arctic states, but also focus on the task of “protecting Russian interests in the Arctic.”³² Russia’s new Arctic command boasts four Arctic combat teams, more than a dozen new or revitalized Arctic airfields, multiple deep-water ports, and 40 icebreakers with more in production.³³ Although Russia possesses the largest and most capable military forces in the Arctic, they are somewhat limited in their ability to project a significant degree of force beyond Russian borders,³⁴ although since 2007, Russia has reprised regular surveillance and bomber flights over the Arctic.³⁵ There is no indication that Russia intends to use its military forces for any manner of hostile or antagonistic activity in the Arctic, likely to avoid friction with NATO;³⁶ however, given that Russia derives 20 percent of its gross domestic product from economic activity in the Arctic and has plans to increase economic growth,³⁷ it

³⁰US Northern Command, European Command, and Pacific Command all have responsibilities in the Arctic. Wezeman, “Military Capabilities in the Arctic,” p. 17.

³¹MacDonald, “The Militarization of the Arctic,” p. 24.

³²Wezeman, “Military Capabilities in the Arctic,” p. 13.

³³Robbie Gramer, “Here’s What Russia’s Build-Up in the Arctic Looks Like,” for *Foreign Policy*, 25 Jan 2017, online <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/25>, accessed 9 May 2019.

³⁴Adam MacDonald, “Time to Re-Think Canada’s Arctic Military Requirements?” For *Inside Policy Magazine*, Mar 2017, online at www.macdonaldlaurier.ca, accessed 9 May 2019.

³⁵Wezeman, “Military Capabilities in the Arctic,” p. 14.

³⁶MacDonald, “Time to Re-Think.”

³⁷Michael J. Forsyth, “Why Alaska and the Arctic are Critical to the National Security of the United States,” In *Military Review*, Jan-Feb 2018 edition, Fort Leavenworth: Army University Press, 2018, p. 116.

would be naïve not to believe that Russia would be willing to take steps to protect its economic interests if it felt threatened.

That non-Arctic nations are conducting military activities in the vicinity of the Arctic presents an interesting dynamic for the Arctic Council and it is a part of the military security discussion that needs to occur among the Council's members. Under Great Britain's Defence Arctic Strategy, that nation has pledged a ten-year deployment of 800 troops to Norway and four multi-role fighter jets to patrol the skies over Iceland.³⁸ China has referred to itself as a Near-Arctic state, and in 2012, a Chinese naval task group sailed off the coast of Alaska, generating fear that China may someday use its navy to challenge the authority of Arctic coastal states over their maritime jurisdictions.³⁹ While there is currently no indication that China has imminent intentions to challenge the regional order in the Arctic, it is expected that Chinese scientific, commercial, and naval vessels will eventually become more common in the Arctic,⁴⁰ and it is acknowledged that China may be playing a long game to slowly establishing itself as a stakeholder.⁴¹ The cases of Great Britain and China both further demonstrate the need for a forum to discuss military activities in the Arctic that includes Russia. In the case of Great Britain, such a forum could be helpful in allaying Russian discomfort and uneasiness with yet another NATO member flexing its military muscle seemingly in the face of Russian interests. China's naval activity demonstrates the potential need for all members of the Arctic Council for all members to use their military forces together to protect their Arctic

³⁸Jonathan Watts, "Military buildup in Arctic as melting ice reopens northern borders," For *The Guardian*, 24 Jan 2019, online www.the-guardian.com/world/2019/jan, accessed 9 May 2019

³⁹MacDonald, "Time to Re-Think."

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹MacDonald, "The Canadian Armed Forces and the Arctic," p. 3.

interests. As climate change makes the Arctic, and the natural resources that are assessed to be there more accessible, it is likely that military activity in the Arctic will continue to increase.

CONCLUSION

Military forces of the eight member states on the Arctic Council play an important role for their countries in fulfilling their obligations to the Council. Although the role of military security is specifically excluded from the Arctic Council's core mandate, military forces are present in the Arctic, and no one should pretend that these forces are not fully combat capable. The annual meeting of defence chiefs attended by senior military officers of the Arctic states has initiated the discussion of military matters among Arctic nations; however, security matters that are contested among members of the group continue to be avoided.⁴² Given the current geopolitical climate in which tension between Russia and the west, and in particular between Russia and NATO, is growing, effective forums for discussion regarding military activity in the Arctic are becoming fewer. Nonetheless, these discussions need to occur to mitigate misunderstanding and mistrust. The Arctic Council should leverage its track record of dialogue and cooperation to address the issue of military security before the conversation becomes more necessary.

⁴²MacDonald, "The Militarization of the Arctic," p. 27.

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