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## The Conundrum of Arctic Deterrence in the Information Age: A Coordinated Strategic Message Matters

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**THE CONUNDRUM OF ARCTIC DETERRENCE IN THE INFORMATION AGE:  
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By Major J.A. Baker

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## **THE CONUNDRUM OF ARCTIC DETERRENCE IN THE INFORMATION AGE: WHY A COORDINATED STRATEGIC MESSAGE MATTERS**

### **Introduction**

The linkage between RCAF operations and activities in the arctic, arctic deterrence, and the role that a coordinated strategic message plays is a critical aspect of a comprehensive arctic deterrence strategy. Unfortunately, a coordinated strategic message has often been an afterthought to operational planners, at least until the very recent past.<sup>1</sup> A changing global security environment combined with the increased use of the information domain (ID) by our adversaries, notably Russia's use of social media, has forced military planners to revisit how we think about messaging and the information environment (IE).<sup>2</sup> A critical aspect of this analysis is the role that information plays in the wider arctic deterrence strategy, and specifically how the RCAF can use information to counter Russia's growing influence in the Arctic. While messaging and communications have largely been accomplished under the auspices of public affairs, a grey space exists between information operations (IO) and public affairs that military officials must be cognisant of. In order to properly message arctic activities, the RCAF requires a comprehensive communication strategy that links arctic activities to strategic messaging objectives.

This essay will argue that Russia's weaponization of information as part of their broader hybrid warfare doctrine has driven the requirement for the RCAF to focus more

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Lajeunesse, "The Canadian Armed Forces in the Arctic: Purpose, Capabilities, and Requirements," Canadian Global Affairs Institute. CDFAI, the School of Public Policy, and the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Seán Carnew, and Jason Furlong, "Social Media Is A Weapon," Proceeding 143, no. 8 (August 2017): 70-73.

on non-kinetic ops as part of a deterrence strategy.<sup>3</sup> Further, it will argue that a greater emphasis on strategic communications (StratCom) in the arctic is required as part of a credible deterrence strategy in the face of a renewed focus on great power competition.

This essay will first examine the changing security environment and the challenges it presents from a deterrence perspective. Next it will explore Russian actions in the IE, and specifically how Russia sees information warfare as one part of its overall warfare strategy. Finally, it will explore the RCAF's information activities and identify potential issues that could come as a result of an expanded use of IO as part of a comprehensive approach to arctic deterrence.

### **The Conundrum of Arctic Deterrence**

The adage of a tree falling in the forest is fitting for how to describe the conundrum of conducting deterrence operations in the Canadian Arctic. For arctic operations, the adage could be restated as, "If the CAF conducts operations and activities in the arctic, was the effect achieved if those activities were not actively messaged?" Granted, those who initially envisioned the quote were likely thinking more about physics than deterrence in the arctic, nevertheless it still seems appropriate. The challenge is how can arctic operations, and operations in the north in general, be leveraged for strategic effect without a proactive and comprehensive messaging strategy?

This question should give planners and decision makers pause. While it may oversimplify the problem set. It does speak to one of the main pillars of NORAD's

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<sup>3</sup> Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "Russian hybrid warfare: A study of disinformation," DIIS Report, No. 2017:06, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen: 2017.

defence of North America, deterrence. Broadly speaking, operations in the Arctic are hard. The environment is unforgiving, even outside of the harsh winter conditions, and there is very little infrastructure in place to sustain long term operations. It is for these reasons that our activities in the arctic, even those considered benign or non-consequential, should be leveraged wherever possible to take advantage of their broader strategic messaging opportunities.

This is something that Russia, who is arguably our greatest competitor in the arctic, has recognised and have firmly entrenched the ID into their overall hybrid warfare strategy.<sup>4</sup> Russia's use of the ID will be discussed shortly. First, it is useful to examine the changing security environment.

### **A Changing Security Environment**

“The brief respite from great power conflict in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is over, and the homeland is no longer a sanctuary.”<sup>5</sup> The preceding quote, attributed to Gen O’Shaughnessy, the previous Commander of NORAD and NORTHCOM refers to the changing global security environment, and the increased threat that Russia and China pose to North America because of a new era of great power competition. The implications of the statement are profound. It makes clear the security dilemma presented by great power adversaries who are able to exploit holes in North American defences through alternative hybrid warfare strategies, standoff weapon systems, and advanced technologies. The statement speaks to both the importance of a

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<sup>4</sup> "Russian Military Admits Significant Cyber-War Effort," BBC Europe (BBC News), 23 February 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Terrence J O’Shaughnessy, and Peter M. Fesler, “Hardening the Shield: A Credible Deterrent & Capable Defense for North America.” Wilson Center. The Canada Institute. September, 2020, 2.

comprehensive deterrent strategy, and the challenge that faces those charged with planning the defense of North America. The changing global security environment has forced a shift from counterinsurgency operations, which have largely dominated the last twenty years, to great power competition which now threatens North America.<sup>6</sup> The challenge of deterrence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is only becoming more difficult and complex.

The complexities of the changing security environment are only made worse for Canada and the US by an aging infrastructure, and a lack of resources. In a recent virtual roundtable on NORAD modernization, LGen Pelletier, the current Deputy Commander of NORAD noted that “with aging systems and just two percent of NORAD’s original force strength to draw upon from Cold War peak, the command can no longer deter great power adversaries as it had during the Cold War.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, the most recent statement on the issue of deterrence in the face of great power competition comes from Gen VanHerck, the current Commander of NORAD and NORTHCOM.

...This growing gap between our nuclear strategic deterrent and our conventional deterrent capability is specific to our ability to defend the homeland and generate effects right here in North America. Unfortunately, this gap could be exploited by our competitors, kinetically or nonkinetically, with the belief that they might achieve their objectives and remain below the nuclear threshold.”<sup>8</sup>

All of this speaks to the requirement that NORAD embrace an all-domain approach to deterrence. An all-encompassing approach that also includes the ID.

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<sup>6</sup> O’Shaughnessy and Fesler, 2.

<sup>7</sup> The Conference of Defence Associations Institute. “NORAD Modernization: Report One: Awareness & Sensors.” CDA Institute. NORAD Modernization Forum. 16 Sep 2020, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Glen D. VanHerck, “Deter in Competition, Deescalate in Crisis, and Defeat in Conflict,” Joint Forces Quarterly 101, 2nd Quarter (April 2021), 7.

Given the changing security environment, how do we best deter our competitors? In her 2019 paper on the cost of deterrence Dr Charron notes that “Deterrence is not just a mathematical calculation involving the number of military assets.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, deterrence activities and operations do not just exist in the traditional defence domains, they exist in all domains, and must include both kinetic and non-kinetic means and mechanisms. A deterrence strategy that relies on kinetic means alone, such as was seen during the Cold War is untenable for a number of reasons.

First among them is that the CAF, and by extension the RCAF, does not possess the required capabilities. Effects such as airborne command and control, and robust air refueling capability, both an absolute requirement to operate outside of ground-based radar and radio range, do not exist in the RCAF inventory. A strategy that over emphasizes kinetic means would require that Canada further leverage the US to produce these effects, which would likely serve to exacerbate what many already see as Canada’s overreliance on the US.<sup>10</sup> Second, the implication of purely kinetic means suggests a more offensive role in deterrence, for example engaging rather than defending. While the strategy of deterrence through offence makes sense from the standpoint that “offence and defense are two sides of a coin”, for Canada, where the government and the population have always been reticent to support any such strategy, this is problematic.<sup>11</sup> Third, a strategy that focuses too heavily on kinetic capabilities is biased towards being overly

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<sup>9</sup> Andrea Charron, and James Fergusson, “Rediscovering the Cost of Deterrence,” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, September 2019, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Charron, “Responding to the Hardening the SHIELD: A Credible Deterrent and Capable Defense for North America,” North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network. 11 September 2020, 2.

responsive rather than proactive.<sup>12</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, recent thinking into how our competitors might exploit seams and gaps in our defenses indicate that Russia and China will likely undertake actions, “short of direct confrontation to undermine will and credibility.”<sup>13</sup> Many see this as a significant challenge as this type of strategy all but eliminates the nuclear deterrent by remaining below the threshold of reprisal by nuclear force.

We then come back Dr. Charron’s statement above, which is central to the main argument of this essay, that being, a comprehensive communications strategy is a critical to arctic deterrence. Indeed, Gen VanHerck pointedly notes that, “through unambiguous communication of our ability to counter threats below the nuclear threshold, we can achieve deterrence by denial.”<sup>14</sup> VanHerck’s comments are a concrete example of how important the IE is in the “global narrative warfare” battle.<sup>15</sup> How then do our competitors use the ID? The following section will examine that issue.

### **Russia’s Weaponization of Information**

Russia’s recent use of IO in multidomain operations has been well documented. From their invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, to their operations in eastern Ukraine, to US election interference in both 2016 and 2020, to exploiting social media to highlight high arctic operations, it is undeniable that Russia has used information to great effect in

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<sup>12</sup> VanHerck, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Charron, and James Fergusson, “NORAD and NORTHCOM’s Deterrence Conundrum: From Defence to Punishment to Denial,” Paper presented at the 2020 Homeland Defense Academic Symposium, Peterson AFB, Colorado Springs, CO, 1-3 December, 2020, with permission, 5.

<sup>14</sup> VanHerck, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Suzanne Waldman, and Marshall Erickson. “Strategic Communication in the Present and Future Military Enterprise,” *Journal of Future Conflict* 02, (Fall 2020), 1.



an attempt to subvert “informed free will.”<sup>16</sup> None of this is by accident. Russia’s manipulation of information is all part of what has been described as their propaganda apparatus, and is just one of various means Moscow employs to achieve the nation’s political objectives.<sup>17</sup> In fact, information and propaganda are two of the main tools of Russian influence meant to spin information in their favor, and to sow discord amongst the local populace (as in Ukraine), and in western nations.<sup>18</sup> The challenge presented by Russian influence activities is that they are carried out continuously, both in times of peace, and in times of war.<sup>19</sup>

Weeden and Samson acknowledge this challenge, noting that, “Russian military thinkers see modern warfare as a struggle over information dominance and net-centric operations that can often take place in domains without clear boundaries and contiguous operating areas.”<sup>20</sup> The Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 provides a clear example of their strategy to weaponize information to achieve their goals, notably through the use of social media.<sup>21</sup> In Ukraine, Russia spent close to \$20 million dollars to bankroll some 600 “social media specialists” who were later discovered to be part of the Russian Internet Research Agency.<sup>22</sup> Their aim was to “sway public and international opinion, overwhelm the voices of dissidents online, and create an image of a population

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<sup>16</sup> Samuel S Visner, “Russia used Social Media to Weaponize American Free Will. here's what to do about it.” Nextgov.Com (Online) (2017), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Geir Hågen Karlsen, “Tools of Russian Influence: Information and Propaganda,” In *Ukraine and Beyond: Russia’s Strategic Security Challenge to Europe*, edited by Janne Haaland Matlary and Tormod Heier, 181-208. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 181.

<sup>18</sup> Karlsen, 181.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Weeden, and Victoria Samson, “Global Counterspace Capabilities: An Open Source Assessment,” Broomfield, CO: Secure World Foundation, 2020, xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili, and Sanda Svetoka, “Strategic Communications and Social Media in the Russia Ukraine Conflict,” NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 107.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Holloway, “How Russia Weaponized Social Media in Crimea,” The Strategy Bridge, 10 May 2017.

supportive of the annexation.”<sup>23</sup> This and other influence activities that followed in the prevailing years only serve to corroborate their approach and prove their ability to coordinate and weaponize information on a grand scale. Carnew and Furlong pointedly note that if nations use “...campaigns of influence [that] are well designed, coordinated, coherent, and carefully managed, their effectiveness is greatly increased.”<sup>24</sup> This certainly appears to be the case with Russia.

When Russia’s activities in the arctic are examined, it becomes clear that as the pace of their activities accelerates, both military and economic, so too does the pace of their influence activities. When Russian Col Eminov proclaimed, “We are defending the borders of our homeland...This is deterrence” it was meant as a clear message to arctic nations.<sup>25</sup> The statement came during a press tour of Russia’s northernmost arctic operating location at Nagurskoye airbase located on Aleksandra Land, the northernmost island of the Franz Josef Land archipelago.

The isolated archipelago was also recently used as a backdrop for a YouTube video that showcased Russian military arctic capabilities.<sup>26</sup> The video which has been viewed over 1.2 million times starts by showing three Russian nuclear submarines breaking through the arctic sea ice, and a member of the submarine crew emerging from the hatch to salute what appears to be a drone. It then goes on to portray joint Russian arctic land, sea and air activities in what might be considered the equivalent of an Arctic

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<sup>23</sup> Holloway.

<sup>24</sup> Carnew, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, “In the Russian Arctic, the First Stirrings of a Very Cold War,” NY Times online. 22 May 2021.

<sup>26</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defence. “Integrated Arctic expedition of the Russian Navy and Russian Geographical Society – Umka-21.” Translated. YouTube Video, 3:15. 26 March, 2021.

coup de grâce of strategic messaging. Not surprisingly, Russia's militarization of the arctic has led many members of the Arctic Council, including the US and Canada, to express concern over what they see as a trend towards the militarization of the arctic.<sup>27</sup> These concerns stem from Russia arctic activities, and also their recent assumption of the chairmanship of the Arctic Council. Russia has done little to assuage these concerns as evidenced by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov when he expressed Russia's intent to "reintroduce a military dimension into international arctic activities", as well as their proposal to introduce maritime rules in the Northern Sea Route.<sup>28</sup>

Given the above, it is clear that Russia is using information deliberately and to great effect. It is also clear that the arctic has been thrust into the centre of global competition.<sup>29</sup> How then does our use of the ID compare, and how can Canada and the US counteract Russia's information activities?

### **RCAF and Allied Information - Activities, Usage, Gaps, and Constraints**

Until now this essay has discussed the challenges posed by a changing security environment, and by great power competitors who are already active in the ID as a tool to achieve national objectives. The following section will discuss how Canada and its allies currently use information, examples of how information activities are leveraged for strategic messaging, and address current gaps that exist in CAF policy that could limit RCAF activities.

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew Lee, "US, Russia at odds over military activity in the Arctic," AP News Online. 20 May 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Lee, "US, Russia at odds over military activity in the Arctic."

<sup>29</sup> VanHerck, 7.

Canada, its allies, and organizations such as NORAD and NATO are all currently using the IE to achieve effects. The difference is that the latter have doctrine covering StratCom, and employ dedicated staff to implement comprehensive communications strategies, while the CAF does not.<sup>30, 31</sup> These communications strategies are in recognition of the importance that militaries must “generate more effects in the IE, to counter exploitative narratives that can threaten operations and to broadly influence audiences.”<sup>32</sup> Even though allied activities in the ID are more constrained than our competitors, they are still very effective at accomplishing StratCom objectives. NORAD employs social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to push strategic messaging objectives. NATO leverages social media in a similar fashion, and in fact, goes even further with a presence on YouTube, Flickr and even Pinterest.<sup>33</sup> The NORAD social media accounts are very active in promoting the Command’s arctic activities. Recent twitter posts include Noble Defender operations, Amalgam Dart exercises, posts highlighting allied and partner cooperation, and finally real-world responses to Russian strategic military aviation that include intercept operations.<sup>34</sup> NORAD’s #WeHaveTheWatch hashtag is now commonplace on the Twitter feeds of millions of followers, and provides an excellent example of a comprehensive strategic messaging strategy used as a tool for deterrence operations.

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<sup>30</sup> NATO. AJP 3.10. Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations. Edition A Version 1. NATO Standardization Agency. 2014.

<sup>31</sup> United States. Department of Defence. JP 3-3, Information Operations. 27 November 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Suzanne Waldman, and Marshall Erickson. “Strategic Communication in the Present and Future Military Enterprise,” *Journal of Future Conflict* 02, (Fall 2020), 3.

<sup>33</sup> NATO. “Connect with NATO on Social Media.” NATO e-library. 20 June 2017. Accessed 27 May 2021.

<sup>34</sup> North American Aerospace Defense Command. Twitter Homepage. Accessed 27 May 2021.

The RCAF, to their credit, has been active on Social Media since 2010, long before NORAD.<sup>35</sup> The main difference between the two organizations online presence is the narrative that is being pushed. Messages and tweets posted by the RCAF tend to be apolitical, and in line with the governmental strategic narrative, whereas NORAD uses the platform as both a tool to communicate the narrative, and as a tool for IO.<sup>36</sup> Their #WeHaveTheWatch twitter handle being an example of the latter. A large part of this is based on policy. The RCAF is facing two issues in its quest to incorporate IO into its deterrence policy. The first, and most problematic, is an out-of-date IO doctrine. The second is the requisite expertise to plan for and synchronize IO operations across the enterprise.

The current CAF (CF) policy “CFJP 03.10 – Information Operations” was last updated in 1998, some 23 years ago. To put that into perspective, Facebook was not launched until 2004, Twitter until 2006, and Instagram until 2010.<sup>37</sup> While NATO and NORAD have both readily adopted and institutionalized StratCom, and have developed comprehensive doctrine covering its use, the term has not been written into CAF doctrine, and has yet to be quantified with its own definition.<sup>38</sup> This is a critical point as StratCom is a process that enables the military to produce coherent and strategic messages about its activities and their objectives as a whole.<sup>39</sup> On this final point there has been some movement as a directive was released prior to the pandemic that directed

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<sup>35</sup> Ben Forrest, “RCAF reaches social media milestone.” SKiES magazine online. 20 July 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Rupinder Mangat, "Tweeting Strategy: Military Social Media Use as Strategic Communication," (2018). Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Maryville University. “The Evolution of Social Media: How Did It Begin, and Where Could It Go Next?” Accessed 23 May 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Jill Lawrence, “A Strategic Chorus: Integrating Public Affairs and Other Information Enablers,” Service Paper, Canadian Forces College, 202, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Waldman and Erickson, 4.

the institutionalization of StratCom across the DND/CAF.<sup>40</sup> Having said that, the implementation and institutionalization of StratCom processes will take time and effort.

The dated CAF policy has led to a substantial grey area between IO activities and StratCom activities such as public affairs, and is a significant issue that planners face. This recently came to light when contingency plans being prepared as part of the CAFs response to the COVID-19 crisis were reported in the media. The article alleges the CAF plan was based on “influence campaigns used during the Afghan war” to influence the public to support government.<sup>41</sup> The CAF denied that assessment while acknowledging the plan.<sup>42</sup> The plan was never formalized, and was ultimately scuttled by senior military officials, in part because of the perceptions of conducting IO activities against the Canadian public no matter how well intentioned. In fact, a CDS interview with CBC in March 2020 revealed that military officials acknowledged efforts by the CAF to craft a counter-narrative to ensure the public that “martial-law” was not under consideration.<sup>43</sup> This provides a clear example of the limitations that CAF planners confront in the face of increased use of the ID. Without updated policy and doctrine planners are left to their own devices to determine what is and what is not acceptable in terms of information activities.

It stands to reason that given the outdated CAF IO doctrine, and the lack of StratCom guidance, the implementation of a comprehensive and consolidated messaging strategy amongst CAF activities proves problematic, let alone RCAF activities.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> David Pugliese, “Canadian Forces 'information operations' pandemic campaign quashed after details revealed to top general,” Ottawa Citizen Online. 20 July, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Pugliese.

<sup>43</sup> Waldman and Erickson, 7.

Finally, the issue of expertise. The RCAF's operational headquarters, 1 Canadian Air Division does not currently possess any IO capabilities outside of Public Affairs. The result is that all StratCom activities are coordinated by Public Affairs staff who currently have a mandate to remove themselves from the conduct of IO activities.<sup>44</sup> The same is true for the larger CAF enterprise. As evidenced by this essay, there is a clear requirement to synchronize information activities, unfortunately the organization lacks an official mandate or guidance to accomplish that. The result is that the RCAF if forced into an Ad Hoc approach to messaging, when the opposite should be true.

## **Conclusion**

This essay attempted to demonstrate the importance information plays in a comprehensive deterrence strategy. By examining the changing security environment and our competitors' actions in the ID it is clear that a requirement exists to employ a comprehensive communications strategy across the RCAF and the CAF, in order to counter their activities, and demonstrate our own capabilities through messaging. It goes without saying that strategic messaging and the use of Social media is force agnostic. The same principle of using social media as a tool for both influence and information is applicable across all three CAF services, and in order to take full advantage of this the CAF must develop doctrine that enables instead of hinders its use.

The assumption that conflicts today and in the future will be "shaped more by narratives than by traditional weapons," is now a fact.<sup>45</sup> An active messaging strategy

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<sup>44</sup> Lawrence, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Waldman, 2.

based on updated doctrine and guidance is crucial to achieve the desired effects, in order to accomplish the governments strategic objectives. It is for these reasons that our activities in the arctic matter. Even innocuous activities such as a resupply missions to Alert should be measured against broader StratCom objectives, and leveraged wherever possible. The RCAF should treat information as an arctic capability, and actively seek to leverage arctic activities in this capability whenever possible.



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