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## THE ROLE OF NATO IN ARCTIC SECURITY

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### Service Paper

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# THE ROLE OF NATO IN ARCTIC SECURITY

## AIM

1. This paper aims to discuss the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Arctic security. Although NATO can bring many resources to the table, it can also lead to increasing tensions between the main Arctic superpower Russia and the rest of the Arctic states.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, there is a delicate balance to be managed between the role of NATO in the Arctic and allowing the Arctic nations to lead through existing channels such as the Arctic Council. As requested by Canadian Joint Operations Command Director General Operations (CJOC DG OPS) this paper will also discuss which political strategy would best benefit the Government of Canada (GoC) and make some recommendations to ensure Arctic security and sovereignty goals remain achievable into the future.

## INTRODUCTION

2. For many years, Canada has profited from the inaccessibility of the Arctic as an added security feature for its northern border. The impacts of climate change in the Arctic potentially making it more accessible along with advances in technology have sparked the interest of the international community seeking long-term economic benefits. The Arctic area is known to be rich in mineral, oil, and gas resources with up to 22% of the world's reserves yet to be discovered and capitalized upon. Additionally, transiting through the Northern Sea Route (NSR) or the Northwest Passage (NWP) represents a 40% distance shortcut compared to using the Panama or Suez Canal shipping routes. Increasing accessibility has also piqued the interest of the tourism industry with multiple cruise ship companies looking to increase Arctic voyages.<sup>2</sup> This potential rise in activity poses numerous challenges to the Arctic states where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security all converge.

3. For more than two decades, the Arctic states have enjoyed peaceful collaboration on economic, environmental, and safety issues. This can be contributed to the overall success of the Arctic Council formally standing up in 1996. Major accomplishments include the Agreement on Cooperation and Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in 2011, and the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in 2013.<sup>3</sup> The agreements have encouraged and facilitated many training exercises in the Arctic some of them being multilateral state agreements, which have included Russia and some have been NATO deployments heavily supported by the other Arctic states.<sup>4</sup> However, the growing distrust between Russia and the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://arctic-council.org>, accessed 15 January 2022. The Arctic Council is comprised of 8 Arctic states: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and United States. Additionally there are 6 organizations that represent Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic who are permanent participants.

<sup>2</sup> Frédéric Lasserre and Olivier Faury. *Arctic Shipping: Climate Change, Commercial Traffic and Port Development*, edited by Lasserre, Frédéric, Olivier Faury. 1st ed. Vol. 12. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY;: Routledge, 2020;2019, 1.

<sup>3</sup> <https://arctic-council.org>, accessed 15 January 2022.

<sup>4</sup> John Higgenbotham, *Canada's Arctic Agenda: Into the Vortex*. Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2019, 87. Non NATO training exercises include Canada's participation in a large-scale Norwegian Cold Response exercise in 2016 where Canada deployed 2 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Royal

West, largely fueled by the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and recent hostilities on the Russian-Ukrainian border, could indicate an approaching “tipping point in the resilience of the Arctic Council co-operation.”<sup>5</sup> Herein lies the crux of the problem. Four of the five littoral Arctic states are NATO members and would seemingly benefit from increasing NATO activity in the region. However, the biggest and most influential Arctic state, Russia, should and cannot be excluded from this cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Although NATO may have a role to play in Arctic Security in some capacity, this paper will argue that it is in the best interest of the Government of Canada (GoC) to continue to promote Arctic nations taking the lead in Arctic security matters.

4. The following section will discuss the various geopolitical and economic intricacies that the GoC must be aware of and carefully consider when committing to an increased presence of NATO in the Arctic regions. It will first review the current stance the GoC has taken with regards to promoting the use of NATO in the Arctic. It will then discuss how the increase of tensions between the great powers of Russia, China, and the US does not directly correlate with an increase in the risk of war and destabilization in the Arctic region. Next, it will discuss the advantages to the GoC of keeping non-arctic states out of the Arctic. Finally, it will close with a discussion on the advantages for the GoC to remain as neutral as possible when dealing with Russia in the Arctic region to avoid unnecessarily antagonizing them.

## DISCUSSION

5. It is clear through the release of Canada’s latest Defence Strategy, Strong Secure Engaged (SSE), that the Canadian Government has decided to emphasize its renewed commitment to increase presence in the Arctic. Historically, the GoC has been very cautious on supporting increased presence of NATO operations in the Arctic region. Some of the reasons include that it “would unnecessarily antagonize Russia, draw non-Arctic European states more directly into Arctic affairs writ large or amplify the misconception that Arctic regional dynamics are likely to precipitate conflict between Arctic states.”<sup>7</sup> Despite these valid concerns, the wording in SSE shows the GoC openness to directly refer to operating with NATO vice allies and to specifically name Russia as the primary threat having the ability “to project force from its Arctic territory into the North Atlantic, and its potential to challenge NATO’s collective defence posture.”<sup>8</sup> It can be assumed that this more pointed posture was to show a united front with Canada’s most important Arctic ally, the United States (US) during the Trudeau-Obama period. However, many political and economic events such as the Trump presidency, the US capitol attack of the White House and the US handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, have put into

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Canadian Regiment. Russia has previously participated in this yearly exercise but not since 2014. Examples of NATO deployments include 2016 Dynamic Mongoose off Norwegian waters, 2018 Trident Juncture, and the Canadian led 2019 OP Nanook where Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland participated.

<sup>5</sup> Juha Kämpylä and Harri Mikkola. "Contemporary Arctic Meets World Politics: Rethinking Arctic Exceptionalism in the Age of Uncertainty." In *The Global Arctic Handbook*, Springer International Publishing, 2018, 159.

<sup>6</sup> Olena Podvorna, and Taras Zhovtenko. "NATO Arctic Policy in Statu Nascendi." *Studia Politica* (Bucuresti) 19, no. 2 (2019), 178.

<sup>7</sup> John Higgenbotham, *Canada’s Arctic Agenda: Into the Vortex...*, 70.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Canada, Strong Secure Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy (June 2017), 79.

question Canada's strategy to link arms so strongly with the US. The Canadian public is increasingly becoming more aware of the divergent nature of the various interests and geopolitical decisions being made between Canada and the US.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore time to reconsider the GoC's stance on increasing NATO's presence in the Canadian Arctic.

6. The Arctic region is and will likely remain a region of peace and cooperation as shown by its resiliency through some significant challenges over the years. This can be largely attributed to the governance structure anchored by the Arctic Council and the commitment of the Arctic states "to foster cooperation and defuse potential conflict dynamics."<sup>10</sup> Competition for resources was primarily settled using the United Nations Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) governance mechanism resulting in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) being well defined and generally uncontested. There are a few open items such as Canada's claim of controlling the rights to the NWP as territorial waters and a dispute with the Danish over Hans Island but these issues pose little risk of escalating into a conflict. Similarly, Russia also has an open dispute on the EEZ line with Norway off the Spitsbergen archipelago but continues to work diplomatically and within the rules of international law to resolve. The most dramatic episode that really caught the world's attention was in 2007 when Russia planted its national flag on the seafloor of the North Pole. This was an attempt to claim that the seabed is directly connected to the Russian continental shelf thus giving Russia ownership of any resources found in this seabed. The claim is still up for consideration within the United Nations, but even so, conducting resource extraction evolutions within the North Pole region poses multiple physical, environmental and economic barriers making the feasibility of such a venture a non-starter for several decades to come.<sup>11</sup> All this to say, is that the Arctic region is a vast and remote area of land in which the Arctic states have largely agreed upon the borders. Therefore, from a land dispute perspective, there is a very low risk of contention that would lead to increasingly aggressive conflicts. One could then argue that there is no pressing need for increased security presence operations.

7. Due to the harshness of operating in the Arctic and the overwhelming need to pool resources for economic growth, "Arctic states have little to gain from conflict dynamics that would create an unfruitful investment and development environment for Arctic exploration and exploitation."<sup>12</sup> Mining resources and transporting them is a common challenge for all Arctic states. Russia's investments in the Arctic represents 25% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) compared to 1% in Canada. Although Russia is the primary threat to the Western world, it is highly unlikely anyone including Russia will be motivated to make the Arctic region an area of conflict.<sup>13</sup> Although the Russian buildup of multiple ports and airbases along the NSR is causing

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<sup>9</sup> Adam Perry MacDonald, "China-Russian cooperation in the Arctic: A cause for concern for the Western Arctic States?", *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 27:2, 2021. 206.

<sup>10</sup> Juha Kåpylä and Harri Mikkola. "Contemporary Arctic Meets World Politics...", 155.

<sup>11</sup> Rob Huebert, "Canada and the Newly Emerging International Arctic Security Regime." In *Arctic Security in an Age of Climate Change*: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 209.

<sup>12</sup> Juha Kåpylä and Harri Mikkola. "Contemporary Arctic Meets World Politics...", 156.

<sup>13</sup> "Arctic Stability and Climate Change," *Defence Deconstructed*, Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 15 October 2021. Arctic Stability and Climate Change - Canadian Global Affairs Institute (cgai.ca)

western apprehension regarding Russia's true intentions, Russia would have the most to lose if a conflict was to arise. The threat of conflict and destabilization in the Arctic region is therefore very low. Although the GoC should look for opportunities to increase its Arctic constabulary and military capabilities, it does not need to resort to using NATO resources that have its hands full in Europe. Conducting sovereignty patrols, fisheries patrols, and supporting scientific missions can be done using bilateral agreements with Arctic states without the help of NATO.

8. Although it is extremely tempting for the GoC to lean on and invite NATO to participate in mutually beneficial exercises in the high north, it does come with one major drawback. NATO is a very large organization that includes 30 member states, 28 of which are in Europe. Some of the individual countries that belong to NATO are official observers to the Arctic Council, which includes, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (UK). Another country that has been limited to observer status is China. As the Arctic is becoming more accessible, there is more and more interest and competition for potential economic gains. This has led to more forceful lobbying by NATO as a whole and individual non-Arctic states for expanding the Arctic Council members. "Limiting the roles of China, and other non-Arctic States, in formal regional governance matters is a powerful common interest between Russia and the other Arctic States which should not be relegated in importance due to strategic tensions and concerns in other issue areas."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, from a strategic point of view the GoC should carefully consider how much it leans on NATO for Arctic interoperability and training operations. This decision will only make NATO's case stronger for having a permanent seat at the Arctic Council. To date, Canada has enjoyed a prominent role in the Arctic Council with a relatively equal voice among the eight Arctic states. Increasing this small circle would only dilute the amount of influence the GoC has on shaping policies to ensure they remain in line with Canadian values and beliefs. Strategically Canada would be better off developing its own regional capabilities with greater coordination with smaller powers such as Denmark and Norway who are more likely to share in similar interests.<sup>15</sup>

9. Finally, increasing NATO operations in the Arctic in this political environment would only serve to aggravate Russia with very little gain in Arctic security. It is no secret that Russia's military doctrine has placed NATO as their top external threat.<sup>16</sup> The nexus of the dispute with Ukraine is their request to become a NATO member, a condition Russia is forcefully against. Being strategic in conducting bilateral training with Arctic states vs NATO exercises keeps Canada in a more neutral position with Russia, preserving the ability for diplomatic discussions through the Arctic Council. "Russia does not constitute such [an] existential threat as to necessitate complete subordination to American wishes especially given the uncertain future of US hegemony and its approach to working with allies."<sup>17</sup> One cannot deny the strength of the Arctic Council in maintaining diplomatic peace and cooperation in the Arctic region. Russia,

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<sup>14</sup> Adam Perry MacDonald, "China-Russian cooperation in the Arctic...", 202.

<sup>15</sup> Rob Huebert, "Canada and the Newly Emerging International Arctic Security Regime."..., 194.

<sup>16</sup> Aurel Braun and Stephen J. Blank. "Why Canada needs a realistic Arctic Policy." Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2020, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Adam Perry MacDonald, "China-Russian cooperation in the Arctic...", 206.

being the biggest Arctic state and the one currently with the most assets and capabilities in terms of ships, northern ports and airfields, cannot be excluded from cooperation in the region.<sup>18</sup> Russia to date has shown its commitment to using diplomacy in Arctic matters and is currently the chair of the Arctic Council until 2023. Their chosen mandate, which should be supported by the GoC, is to put focus on responsible governance for a sustainable Arctic.<sup>19</sup> The protection of this unique ecosystem while promoting responsible and sustainable extraction of resources will be key to the future of the Arctic and a strategy that resonates with Canadians. Strategically Canada has more to gain working with Russia on issues in the Arctic and is well suited to play the ‘middle man’ between Russia and the US. Canada has nothing to gain politically by causing unnecessary divisions and tensions within the Arctic Council. Therefore, it is in the GoC’s best interest not to lean on NATO for security in the Arctic and to continue to promote Arctic nations taking the lead in Arctic security matters.

## CONCLUSION

10. The GoC as per usual has found itself navigating through a very precarious position but one that also may provide great opportunity. Many countries have expressed interest in conducting cold weather exercises with Canada but as discussed in this paper the GoC must be strategic in how it conducts this training moving forward. The western world and its rules based order continues to be threatened by geopolitical tensions between Russia and NATO mostly centered in Europe. Despite this tension, it would benefit the GoC to continue to have Russia as a constructive partner within the Arctic Council. NATO as an organization should continue to focus where it is needed most which currently is on the Ukrainian border and not in the Arctic. GoC should continue to be the voice of reason and should fight the urge to let politics in other parts of the world such as Ukraine leach into the cooperative environment of the Arctic region. Although NATO could bring many resources to the table in terms of Arctic security, it would also bring non-Arctic states into the fold that simply would complicate matters more. It is therefore, more advantageous for the GoC to rely less on NATO participation and focus more on the bilateral agreements with Arctic states.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

11. The first recommendation to make is for the GoC to continue to strengthen its relationship with like-minded countries such as Norway. Having a partner like Norway who shares more closely the interests and values of Canada is a huge asset. Norway has been leading the way for years in cold weather exercises and is not in direct competition with Russia as is often the case with the US. A non-NATO multinational exercise is more palatable and inclusive of all Arctic states.<sup>20</sup> It also would serve to defuse tensions stemming from a great power rivalry and gives more focus and importance to the contributions of the smaller Arctic states.

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<sup>18</sup> Olena Podvorna, and Taras Zhovtenko. "NATO Arctic Policy...", 178.

<sup>19</sup> <https://arctic-council.org>, accessed 15 January 2022.

<sup>20</sup> John Higgenbotham, *Canada's Arctic Agenda: Into the Vortex...*, 89.

12. Increased human activity in the Canadian Arctic needs more infrastructure support. Although mentioned in SSE as a priority, Canada has not been able to fully develop the deep-sea port in Nanisivik. The lack of this deep-sea port directly affects the versatility of the Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships and is an essential asset Canada must have in order to increase its presence in the Arctic. It is recommended that either the GoC fully commit to developing this port on its own or look into working with private investors who have a mutual interest in developing a port in exchange for berthing and fueling rights for military and coast guard vessels.<sup>21</sup>

13. While it is important to keep Russia as a cooperative partner in Arctic affairs, it would also be naïve to forget about Russia's willingness to ignore international rules and use military force for geopolitical ends. It is therefore important for the GoC to continue to invest in deterrence measures such as upgrading North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) capabilities. This would include much-needed upgrades to the north warning system and other surveillance capabilities for the northern Arctic.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the GoC can show solidarity with the US in sharing the burden of conducting necessary upgrades in the infrastructure that keeps the northern border secure from adversaries.

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<sup>21</sup> "Security Management in the Arctic," *Defence Deconstructed*, Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 8 September 2020, Security Management in the Arctic - Canadian Global Affairs Institute (cgai.ca)

<sup>22</sup> John Higgenbotham, *Canada's Arctic Agenda: Into the Vortex...*, 95.



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