

A SLOW THAW: Canada's Evolving Arctic Defence Posture

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A Global North In Canada's Backyard

In an increasingly globalized and accessible Arctic, the world's attention is being drawn to the high north. Awareness of easier opportunities for resource extraction and faster shipping routes between Europe, North America and Asia have resulted in international actors seeking to grab a piece of the Arctic pie.¹ For Arctic nations such as Canada, this has created fears over an erosion of regional sovereignty as the region becomes internationalised. The militarization of the Russian Arctic by Moscow has heightened fears of a strategic 'great game' that requires a re-focus towards Northern security.² For Canada, there is a balance to be struck between remaining defensible and secure in a region through military alliances, and ensuring that Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic is protected and not eroded through the presence of multiple international actors.

If too many actors are involved in the region, fears exist that Canada will no longer have sovereignty over its northern lands, oceans and resources. Much of the fear over sovereignty erosion revolves around the Northwest Passage (NWP), which Canada insists is Canadian waters. According to Canada, it should be patrolled and international use restricted or regulated as such. Other state actors, notably the US, argue that the passageway should be treated as an international waterway.³ If the NWP were to be treated as an international thoroughfare, Canada could lose out on resources within the region, and lose control over what vessels pass through.

History

Fears of the erosion of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic led to pushback from Ottawa to prevent the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from developing a formal remit for an

increased presence in the region. As Canada fears, opening up the North to the international community could result in diluted Canadian control over their Arctic waters. The traditional stance of multiple Canadian governments was to keep North America defended by North Americans. In 2007, the Harper government blocked a NATO move to include the Arctic in an alliance-level strategic text. This continued with an alleged 'cautioning' of the then NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer by then Prime Minister Harper that the alliance had no role in the high north.⁴ By contrast, the current Trudeau government's security strategy 'Strong, Secure, Engaged' has been argued to have been more accepting of international engagement.⁵ A Canadian House of Commons report from 2018 cited this document as a potential basis for a collective NATO presence in the Arctic, following the inclusion of Arctic information sharing and joint training operations in the region.⁶

As a key potential route for Soviet bombers and surveillance, the Arctic became a strategic theatre of its own for NATO during the Cold War.⁷ It was an area of deployment for nuclear submarines for both NATO and Soviet forces under a period known as the 'Long Polar Watch.'⁸ There have been calls for NATO to develop an Arctic-specific security strategy, and to develop a mandate for the region with increased involvement. The alliance appears to have acted on some of these recommendations; indeed, in 2018 NATO launched its largest ever Arctic exercise, Trident Juncture 2018, which took place primarily in Norway. This saw significant contributions from NATO partners in the area, not least from non-Arctic allies.⁹ With this in mind, there are two central questions that require further examination: First, how has Canada responded to the changing Arctic security environment? Second, how [should](#) Ottawa react to a future in

which non-Arctic allies are becoming increasingly regionally involved?

2011-2016: Pushback

To answer this, we can analyze trends over the last decade. The Department of National Defence (DND) has published an annual report on its plans and priority areas which can offer insights into the DND's motives and thinking behind regional issues, including the Arctic. The DND's 2011 report discusses the future of the Arctic and Canada's role in regional security, focussing on the need for sovereignty, a defensible homeland, and domain awareness. The means through which this goal can be achieved are emphasized throughout the report as being primarily through NORAD. From the outset, the document stresses the need for domain awareness of Canada's territory due to a recognition that the Arctic represents a changing and unpredictable security environment.¹⁰ Domain awareness is intrinsically linked to protecting sovereignty from the very start of this document's Arctic discussion, primarily in the context of NORAD cooperation. This cooperation does not extend beyond the US to NATO, and the report draws a marked distinction between theatres of operation. The text reads: "These include joint Arctic sovereignty operations, routine maritime and NORAD operations to ensure the continued security of our sea and airspace, and air, land, and maritime support to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)." ¹¹ This discussion commits Canadian domestic resources to support NATO but does not commit NATO to the Canadian domestic environment, rather indicating a direct relationship only between NORAD and the Canadian domestic environment. Sovereignty is the other main under-lying requirement stressed here, as Arctic sovereignty operations are noted on several occasions as being 'high priority.'¹² Surveillance is cited as a means through which to exercise and display sovereignty in the region using improvement of domestic awareness capabilities – to achieve these goals, DND 2011 committed the DND to develop various new Arctic facilities and capabilities.

In the DND's 2013 *Report on Plans and Priorities 2013-14*, again, the issue of regional sovereignty is stressed as an issue that requires protection, but also a concept that needs to be proactively exercised. Protecting sovereignty is to be achieved primarily through joint exercises across the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), and increasing regional operability through inter-and joint-agency operations and exercises in the high north.¹³ Notably, the issue is addressed in the first page of the document, raised in the introductory Minister's Message as a regional domestic issue alongside the

need to develop capabilities to assist in response to natural and man-made disasters on Canadian soil.¹⁴ Again, NORAD is discussed as a means through which to achieve these increased capabilities in the region, alongside internal Canadian improvements to regional capacities.¹⁵ *Report on Plans and Priorities 2013-14* does not, however, differ in any significant way from its 2011 iteration, demonstrating a consistency in Canada's approach.

Indeed, the DND 2016 version of the document, *Report on Plans and Priorities 2016-2017*, also continues along near-identical lines. This continuity is notable as it remains consistent despite the change of government the year prior. The themes of sovereignty through surveillance and regional control continue in the same vein. The need for control and surveillance changes in its urgency, described as being a heightened security risk.¹⁶ The Arctic region is also cited as a region that is 'especially' in need of a renewed focus on control and surveillance in comparison to other regions of Canadian territory.¹⁷ One notable change in thought in the document, however, is the need for a developed capacity for a local response to military aggressors.¹⁸ The focus on response capacities is an interesting development from previous years, discussing actually defeating those who may erode regional sovereignty and invade Canadian territory. Previous strategies focus on a regional presence to patrol and lay claim to sovereignty, whereas the 2016 ethos appears to indicate a willingness to fight.

2017-2019: Reluctant & Reserved Acceptance

Released in 2017, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE) represents the Trudeau government's definitive defence policy and a move away from the Harper government's 2008 *Canada First* defence strategy. The most immediate Arctic change that can be seen in SSE is the discussion around NATO's role. While *Report on Plans and Priorities 2016-2017* discussed cooperation through the Arctic Security Force Roundtable, NATO as an active alliance in the north was not discussed in an Arctic context.¹⁹ The NATO discussion changes in SSE, albeit with some nuance and carefully worded language. SSE suggests that NATO is aware of Russia's increasing ability to project power from the Arctic into the North Atlantic and that the alliance is committed to deter against regional threats.²⁰ This language does not commit to a more engaged NATO in the region, however, noting that 'Canada and its NATO Allies will be ready to deter and defend... lines of communication and maritime approaches to Allied territory in the North Atlantic.'²¹ This phrase appears to be a carefully worded way of stating that NATO will defend the areas around Canadian

territory – the approaches – but not that NATO should have a constant presence within Canadian territory.

After affirming that Canada is committed to working with ‘select regional partners’ to improve domain awareness in the Arctic, SSE asserts that Canada is committed to working with all willing partners to improve safety and security in the polar north. Interestingly, the very next line states that ‘NATO is the foundation of Canada’s defence relations in **Europe**’ [bold in original].²² The juxtaposition here is interesting: Canada has a history of promoting a non-Arctic NATO, and the document places a sentence emphasizing that Europe is where NATO’s value for Canada lies immediately after domestic Arctic defence cooperation. A similar disconnect between NATO in Canada and Canada in NATO takes place in the discussion of joint intelligence.²³ SSE discusses the value of joint intelligence within a domestic context, mentioning the need for an all-force approach to intelligence in the Arctic to ensure strong surveillance and domain awareness capabilities. The discussion of NATO in an intelligence-sharing context is relegated further down the page, however, in a separate paragraph discussing the need for confident intelligence gathering and sharing capabilities to help global leaders shape policy.

DND’s 2019 Departmental Plan continues along very similar lines to that of SSE. The primary change is the extent to which Canadian Arctic sovereignty is explicitly mentioned. Previous discussion represented a relatively small section of the planning documents that had a broader defence mandate. In this case, however, protecting Canadian Arctic sovereignty is the third priority of the entire document and has a full sub-headed section.²⁴ Regional collaboration in this context is a notable change from previous DND strategic conversation, which would list one or perhaps two routes of cooperation in a general context. By contrast, *Report on Plans and Priorities 2019-2020* does not shy away from listing multiple avenues of international cooperation in a specific intelligence and domain awareness context.

Focus

As the Arctic has become a region of more global attention, so has it received more attention from DND. There is a mention therefore of Arctic security every 0.23 pages in the 2011 *Report on Plans and Priorities*, but by 2019 it has almost doubled to a mention every 0.41 pages. The language and themes discussed also became more threatening and escalatory. In the later texts, especially in SSE and *Report on Plans and Priorities 2019-2020*, the ability to intercept threats and dangers in the Canadian Arctic is discussed in more detail

than in previous texts. Similarly, there is an increased discussion of maintaining a viable deterrence threat to would-be malign actors, something that is not discussed in detail in the DND’s *Report on Plans and Priorities 2011-2012*.

Conclusion

Consecutive Canadian governments have shown a strong preference for NORAD as a security platform for the Arctic and have been reluctant to see an increased NATO presence in the region. Canada has primarily responded to the changing domestic security environment by doubling down on the desire to protect regional sovereignty. Canada has been willing to use international alliances and connections to improve defence and surveillance capabilities, but a regional alliance is preferred. While warming over the years to an increased international defence presence, careful wording skirts around directly accepting a truly global security focus in the Arctic. SSE does mention NATO in an Arctic context – albeit a nuanced and carefully worded one. SSE mentions NATO as Canada’s premier defence alliance, but there is always a caveat in the conversation that does not commit to an overt NATO presence in the area, with preference always given to NORAD or other Arctic allies.

The overall change from Canada, therefore, is to become more welcoming towards accepting help from outside allies in the region, albeit carefully. In terms of Canada’s capabilities in the region, there has been a consistent desire to improve surveillance and domain awareness capabilities in the Arctic, alongside a growing urge to have the capability to defend against threats, not just to deter. By protecting its capacity to defend Canadian territory and expanding surveillance programs, Ottawa aims to project sovereignty and control over the Canadian Arctic. If Canadian resources are stretched too thin, collaboration with the US is the avenue Ottawa looks to take to shore up these gaps. Canada, conversely, is trying to reach its goal largely by keeping other actors out, solidifying internal capabilities and strengthening partner-ships with its closest regional defence ally, the US. In the North, Canada is focussed on sovereignty and defence, like the US, and sees the value of engaging with allies in the area to improve capabilities, albeit in a non-committal way. Canada places a high value on cooperation through NORAD, as does the US, but on the whole places more emphasis on protecting regional sovereignty as opposed to accepting the trend of an increasingly global region. In a rapidly globalizing and developing Arctic, Canada must be prepared to recognize the reality that the cold North may become a geopolitical hotspot.

Recommendations

1. Use ties to the US as a means to strengthen Canada's position as an Arctic defence provider, rather than isolate Canada within NATO's Arctic mandate. By promoting the bilateral capabilities of the North American states to defend their northern coasts, Canada could keep allies out of the Arctic through positive reinforcement of NORAD's capabilities rather than detracting from allies' involvement.
2. Follow Washington's lead and promote a rules-based international order in the Arctic. The US has pushed, under the Trump and Obama administrations, to promote stability in the region by bringing focus to

Chinese and Russian 'skirting' of international border law in Ukraine, Georgia and the South China Sea. By doing so, and bringing the global spotlight onto the Arctic region, Washington hopes to prevent such methods taking place in the high north. Canada should follow suit.²⁵

3. The value of surveillance capabilities, from both a scientific and defence perspective, cannot be over-stated for the quickly changing region. Improvements to internal capabilities, through investment and engagement with the private sector – again drawing from the US Arctic playbook – could help achieve these goals.²⁶

Endnotes

¹ US Energy Information Administration (2012). *Arctic Oil And Natural Gas Resources*. Available at:

<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=4650>

² Closson, S. (2019). 'The Impacts Of Climate Change On Russian Arctic Security' in R. Kanet (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*, 1st ed. Abingdon: Routledge, pp.299-309.

³ Conley, H. (2012). *A New Security Architecture for the Arctic; An American Perspective*. Csis.org. Available at:

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-security-architecture-arctic>

⁴ Barrera, J. (2011). *While Harper talked tough with NATO on Arctic, U.S. believed PM all bark no bite - APTN News*. APTN News. Available at:

<https://aptnnews.ca/2011/05/11/while-harper-talked-tough-with-nato-on-arctic-u-s-believed-pm-all-bark-no-bite/>

⁵ Regehr, E. (2018). NATO's Brussels Summit and the Arctic. *The Simons Foundation*.

⁶ House of Commons Canada (2018). *Canada and NATO: An Alliance Forged in Strength and Reliability*,

<https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/report-10/page-102#24>

⁷ Dyndal, G. (2011). How the High North became Central in NATO Strategy: Revelations from the NATO Archives. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 34(4), pp.557-585.

⁸ Huebert, R. (2018), "The Arctic and the Strategic Defence of North America: Resumption of the "Long Polar Watch"" in Christian Leuprecht, Joel Sokolsky, and Thomas Hughes (eds.), *North American Strategic Defense in the 21st Century: Security and Sovereignty in an Uncertain World*. New York: Springer. pp. 176-177.

⁹ Luhn, A. (2018). *Nato holds biggest exercises since Cold War to counter Russia's growing presence around the Arctic*. The Telegraph. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/25/nato-holds-biggest-exercises-since-cold-war-counter-russia-arctic/>

¹⁰ Department of National Defence (2011). *Report on Plans and Priorities 2011-2012 Part III - Estimates*. Ottawa: Department of National Defence. 8, 18.

¹¹ Ibid, 18.

¹² Ibid, 20-21.

¹³ Department of National Defence (2013). *Report on Plans and Priorities 2013-14 Part III - Estimates*. Ottawa: Department of National Defence. 53.

¹⁴ Ibid, 5.

¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹⁶ Department of National Defence (2016). *Report on Plans and Priorities 2016-2017*. Ottawa: Department of National Defence. 1, 3.

¹⁷ Ibid, 16.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 28.

²⁰ Government of Canada (2017). *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*. Ottawa: Department of National Defence. 79.

²¹ Ibid, 79-80.

²² Ibid, 90.

²³ Ibid, 64.

²⁴ Department of National Defence (2019). *Report on Plans and Priorities 2019-2020*. Ottawa: Department of National Defence. 11.

²⁵ US Department of Defense (2019). *Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy*. Arlington: Department of Defense.

²⁶ Ibid. This latest DoD Arctic policy from 2019, the first under the Trump administration, increases policy discussion on private sector engagement in the region.