

## Arctic Defence and Security: International and Domestic Dimensions

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Ph.D.

Submission to help frame the Defence Policy Review roundtable discussion in Yellowknife

The traditional view of Arctic security focuses on military defence, especially the protection of national borders and the assertion of state sovereignty over Arctic land and water. During the Cold War, Arctic security was inseparable from national security, nuclear deterrence and the bipolar rivalry between the American and Soviet superpowers. But alternative understandings of security that emphasize economic, social, cultural and environmental concerns have emerged in the post-Cold War period. Many scholars and politicians now promote a broader and deeper conception of security that reflects new and distinct types of threats – and encompasses human and environmental security. This understanding frames Canada’s Whole-of-Government approach to Arctic security which involves many departments and agencies, at various levels of government, as well as Northern community stakeholders. While overshadowed by popular depictions of circumpolar competition and a so-called Arctic arms race, this integrated, comprehensive approach to defence and security reflects an increasingly concerted effort to reduce risks across the mission spectrum and strengthen the resilience of Arctic communities. This framework is already in place in DND policy and, in my assessment, offers a strong and highly appropriate basis for further articulation and implementation.

### Threat Assessments

Strategic documents produced by DND/CAF over the past decade consistently emphasize that Canada does not face any conventional military threats to the Arctic in the foreseeable future. My ongoing analysis suggests that this is a sound assessment and should be reiterated in the forthcoming defence policy statement.

Recent Russian activities (Ukraine, Syria, strategic bomber flights to the limits of North American airspace) suggest a return to great power competition globally. These warrant careful monitoring and analysis in concert with our “premier partner” (the United States) and other NATO partners. Although meeting near-peer competitor threats may require new or renewed capabilities that will be deployed in the Canadian Arctic, they are not borne of Arctic-specific sovereignty issues/disputes (eg. interceptor aircraft and post-NWS detection systems). Yet the consultation document suggests that “Canada must also deal with rising international interest in the Arctic and the challenges related to the changing environment and increased accessibility of our Northern waterways. Recent Russian activity in the Arctic has only added to this challenge.” The last sentence, in my view, is not proven in connection to the first statement. Russian military activities in its Arctic do not relate, in any obvious way, to environmental change or maritime corridors in the Canadian Arctic. This is a false correlation that perpetuates misconceptions by conflating *Arctic issues* (those emerging in and from the region itself) with *grand strategic issues* that may have an Arctic nexus but are appropriately dealt with at a global (rather than narrowly regional) level. In my view, this must be reflected in official policy or the policy itself may create the very misconceptions that build mistrust and create conflict.

Although some media and academic commentators point to China as an emerging military competitor in the Arctic region, this is based purely on speculation and has no basis in verifiable evidence. Accordingly, the alleged Chinese threat to Canada’s Arctic is a “red herring” that should not deflect attention or resources from more important missions in Canada and abroad. Instead, Chinese and other non-Arctic state interests should be monitored within a Whole-of-Government context.

We should continue to leverage relationships with allies to meet Arctic defence challenges. The longstanding Canada-US disagreement on the status of Canada’s Arctic waters remains manageable and does not detract from deep, longstanding cooperation on defence of North America. Broadening the NORAD arrangement to potentially include a maritime control mission should be considered, although I anticipate no need or desire to include land forces in any expanded NORAD framework.

## **Domestic Roles**

The Canadian Armed Forces is likely to play an increasingly active domestic role in support of civilian authorities in the future. The investments already announced to enhance Arctic capabilities, such as the AOPS and CAFATC, as well as recent organizational and doctrinal developments (eg. ARCGs), are sound and appropriate. The existing Arctic Integrating Concept, however, requires full implementation. Accordingly, defence policy should reiterate the importance of investing in Arctic defence capabilities to deter would-be adversaries and assist other government departments in support of their security and safety mandates to ensure effective responses to an “uncertain, complex and fluid security environment.” The Arctic Security Working Group and annual Nanook exercises represent important examples of how DND/CAF plays a leadership role in Whole-of-Government activities with its domestic security partners.

My decade-long research suggests that the land force concept built around IRUs, Reserve-generated Arctic Response Company Groups, and the Canadian Rangers is appropriate to meet the most probable challenges that land forces will be required to meet today and in the future. In particular, the Canadian Rangers represent an invaluable part of the defence team in communities across the North. Rather than expanding the number of Canadian Rangers (as suggested in the Minister’s mandate letter), resources should be allocated to increasing the number of Ranger Instructors and CRPG staff to support them. The recent expansion to 5000 Rangers across Canada has already over-stretched resources, and consolidating this previous growth by strengthening the CRPGs will improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the Rangers while improving the health and wellness of military members who support them.

Canada should strive to maintain military capability across a wide spectrum of operations in the North. Although the strategic deterrent is provided by the United States, Canada should continue to play a key supporting role in the future by developing and contributing space and unmanned systems (related to NORAD surveillance post-NWS). To defend the aerospace approaches to Canada, the government should reconsider its stance on ballistic missile defence and should procure a fighter-interceptor that is seamlessly interoperable with Canada’s major allies. In a broader security and safety context, the government should place a high priority on procuring fixed-wing SAR aircraft and implementing the Northern Operational Hub concept, as well as addressing tactical mobility and communication issues (particularly in the High Arctic).

## **Final Thoughts**

The reality of Canada’s Arctic security vis-a-vis foreign military threats is less worrying than sensational headlines make it out to be. Our joint defence capabilities in the region, while admittedly modest compared to other parts of the world, are more than adequate to meet the low probability of conventional military challenges that we face. Cooperation with the US runs deep and has long been executed effectively and managed with political tact. This should be expected to continue. As President Obama and Prime Minister Trudeau emphasized in their joint statement on 10 March, a shared Arctic leadership model “to embrace the opportunities and to confront the challenges in the changing Arctic, with Indigenous and Northern partnerships, and responsible, science-based leadership” should not be built around inflated military threats to Arctic sovereignty and security. Instead, Canada should fully implement the CAF’s integrated concept for the North and maintain the CAF presence in the region to protect the North American continent, enhance persistent surveillance and monitoring, and provide essential support to civilian authorities during emergencies.