

The background of the page is a composite image. The top half shows a dark, textured blue sky or ice surface. The bottom half shows a reddish-brown, rocky or icy landscape. On the right side, a large, dark ship is visible, partially obscured by the text and the background texture.

THREATS THROUGH, TO, AND IN THE ARCTIC: NORTH AMERICAN DEFENCE AND SECURITY THROUGH A CANADIAN LENS

P. Whitney Lackenbauer

The Arctic region represents an important international crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security meet. Eight states—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States—have territory north of 60, while five of these states border the Arctic Ocean. Arctic states have long cooperated on economic, environmental, and safety issues, particularly through the Arctic Council, the premier body for cooperation in the region. All Arctic states have an enduring interest in continuing this productive collaboration.
— *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (2017), p. 50

Canada's 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE), confirms that the Arctic remains an area of particular interest and focus, highlighting its cultural and economic importance as well as rapid environmental, economic, and social changes that present opportunities and generate or amplify security challenges. To meet those challenges and "succeed in an unpredictable and complex security environment," the Government of Canada is committed to an ambitious program of naval construction, capacity enhancements, and technological upgrades to improve situational awareness, communications, and the ability of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to operate across the Canadian Arctic. The justifications for these investments include a range of drivers and dynamics often compressed into a single narrative, with the Arctic region highlighted as "an important international crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security meet."¹

The Canadian debate on Arctic security over the last two decades reveals four core schools of thought offering divergent regional threat assessments. Proponents of the "sovereignty on thinning ice" school suggest that Arctic

sovereignty, maritime disputes, and/or questions of resource ownership will serve as catalysts for Arctic conflict. This thinking underpinned the "use it or lose it" messaging that dominated during Prime Minister Stephen Harper's first years in office in the mid-2000s. Although this idea no longer dominates academic discussions, it still lingers in news media and public perceptions. Other commentators argue that there is no military threat to the Arctic and that defence resources should instead be directed to dealing with human and environmental security issues associated with climate change and the region as an Indigenous peoples' homeland.

Yet another school of thought argues that, while strategic deterrence continues to have an Arctic dimension (and that this is best conceptualized at an international rather than a regional level of analysis), Canada is not likely to face conventional military threats in or to its Arctic region in the next decade. Instead, members of this school suggest that Canada should focus on building Arctic military capabilities within an integrated, "whole-of-government" framework, largely directed towards supporting domestic safety and



Source: Combat Camera

“soft” security missions that represent the most likely incidents to occur in the Canadian Arctic. It should also invest in sensors and capabilities in the Arctic that can contribute to broader defence-of-North-America missions, but these should not be misconstrued as capabilities needed because the Canadian Arctic itself is specifically threatened by foreign adversaries and vulnerable to attack.

More recent debates emphasize the risks of great power competition globally “spilling over” into the Arctic. Political scientist Rob Huebert, previously the most strident proponent of the “sovereignty on thinning ice” school, recently argued that “a New Arctic Strategic Triangle Environment ... is forming, in which the core strategic interests of Russia, China and [the] United States are now converging at the top of the world.” He suggests that this new “great game” is not about conflict *over* the Arctic but is rather occurring *through* the Arctic. “This does not make the threat any less dangerous,” he suggests, “but it does make it more complicated.” With tensions growing between Russia and the West, and China’s relationships evolving with both the West and Russia, Huebert asserts that “the primary security requirements of the three most powerful states are now overlapping in the Arctic region, producing new challenges and threats.”² While this lens is compatible with the basic tenets of the third school, it places more weight on military threats than on “soft” or human security ones.

This article suggests the value of a model that deliberately parses whether analysts are discussing threats *through*, *to*, *over*, or *in* the Canadian Arctic. In this framework, threats passing *through* the Canadian Arctic emanate from outside of the region and pass through or over it to strike targets that are also outside of region. For example, a supersonic Kalibr-M cruise missile launched from Russia would likely pass over the Canadian Arctic before striking at a target in the northern continental United States. Sensor systems that detect the launch and track the missile might be based in the Arctic, but it would be misconstrued as an *Arctic* threat in a defence-of-North-America context. Threats *to* the Canadian Arctic are those that emanate from outside of the region and affect the region itself. Examples could include a below-the-threshold attack on critical Arctic infrastructure, a foreign vessel running aground in Canadian waters with deleterious environmental effects, the introduction of a pandemic, or the acquisition of a port or airfield at a strategic location by a company owned and controlled by a non-like-minded state. Threats *in* the Arctic originate within the region and have primary implications for the region. Examples include permafrost degradation threatening critical infrastructure, the failure of a diesel-electric generator powering an isolated community, or heightened polarization of public debate leading to economic or political disruption. Some threats, such as climate change (which is caused by activities outside the region and thus represents a threat *to* it, while regional and local climate

dynamics *in* the Arctic, such as extreme weather, threaten local residents), will straddle these categories, but this conceptual exercise can help to determine appropriate scales for preparedness and response to different threats, and by which primary stakeholders should lead response efforts, rather than bundling them all together as a generic laundry list of “Arctic threats.”

Current North American defence modernization discussions are likely to amplify the debate about the nature of Arctic security in Canada and the implications for policy and investment.³ With climate change “opening new access” to the region, Canada’s defence policy observes that “Arctic and non-Arctic states alike are looking to benefit from the potential economic opportunities associated with new resource development and transportation routes.” What does this mean for a country with Arctic policies predicated on the idea of the region as a *place*—with particular salience as an Indigenous homeland—rather than a threat vector? How do measures to address strategic threats to North America passing *through* the Canadian Arctic relate to threats *to* the region or *in* the region? Where does the Canadian Army fit within this strategic picture?

SETTING CANADA’S ARCTIC CONTEXT

As an Arctic state with forty percent of its landmass north of 60° latitude and 162,000 km of Arctic coastline, Canada’s interest in the region is obvious. Its emphasis on the human dimensions of the Arctic, and particularly those related to the northern Indigenous peoples who make up a high proportion of the population, also reflect national realities. Social indicators in Canada’s Indigenous North remain abysmal, reflecting the challenges of providing social services and infrastructure to small, isolated settlements spread out over a vast area. Northern Indigenous peoples also face many challenges associated with rapid changes to their homelands, including threats to language and culture, erosion of traditional support networks, poorer health than the rest of Canadians, and changes to traditional diet and communal food practices. Those challenges represent Canada’s most acute Arctic human security imperative.

Canadian governments have recognized and grappled with the challenge of balancing the needs of Northern Canadians with economic development and environmental protection for fifty years. Under Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper (who was in power from 2006 to 2015), the balance seemed to tip in favour of resource development and hard-line messaging about defending sovereignty. A more careful reading reveals that the Harper government’s sovereignty-security rhetoric became more nuanced over time, reflecting an attempt to balance messaging that promised to “defend” Canada’s Arctic sovereignty with a growing awareness that the most probable regional challenges were “soft” security- and safety-related issues that required “whole-of-government” responses.⁴

Although the election of Justin Trudeau's Liberal party in October 2015 brought a significant change in political tone, the main substantive elements of Canada's Arctic policy have not changed. A domestic focus on Indigenous rights, environmental protection, and the health and resiliency of Northern communities has been complemented by a renewed commitment to global climate change mitigation and the benefits of co-developing policy with Northern stakeholders and rights holders. Through bilateral statements with President Barack Obama in 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau offered a model for Arctic leadership that placed a clear priority on Indigenous and "soft security" issues over classic defence-of-sovereignty-focused messaging.⁵ Similarly, the federal government's *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (ANPF), released in September 2019, indicates a concerted emphasis on environmental conservation and improving the socio-cultural health of Northern Indigenous peoples. The decision to link the domestic and international dimensions of Canada's Arctic strategy in a single policy framework reaffirms the inter-connectivity between national, regional, and global dynamics.⁶

The safety, security, and defence chapter of the ANPF lays out the Government of Canada's objectives to ensure a safe, secure, and well-defended Arctic and North through to 2030. "While Canada sees no immediate threat in the Arctic and the North, as the region's physical environment changes, the circumpolar North is becoming an area of strategic international importance, with both Arctic and non-Arctic states expressing a variety of economic and military interests in the region," the policy framework emphasizes. "As the Arctic becomes more accessible, these states are poised to conduct research, transit through, and engage in more trade in the region. Given the growing international interest and competition in the Arctic, continued security and defence of Canada's Arctic requires effective safety and security frameworks, national defence, and deterrence."⁷

Given the evolving balance of power, changing nature of conflict, and rapid evolution of technology globally over the last decade, official Canadian statements recognize the need for new approaches to anticipate and confront threats and challenges. To remain effective in a highly dynamic, complex global and regional environment, policymakers and planners must develop mechanisms to continuously test their assessments, ideas, and assumptions to ensure that they do not become limiting or outdated. Accordingly, contemplating strategic futures in Canada's Arctic requires attentiveness to global, circumpolar regional, continental, and domestic drivers—with an emphasis on levels or scales—that could affect the CAF's mission to keep Canada strong at home, secure in North America, and engaged in the world to promote peace and stability.

Source: Combat Camera



Canadian Ranger Deborah Iqaluk of 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group participates in Arctic training during Operation NANOOK-NUNALIVUT in Resolute Bay, Nunavut, on 28 March 2019.

Source: Combat Camera



Members of the Arctic Response Company Group unload qamutiiks after returning from patrol to Canadian Forces Arctic Training Centre during Operation NANOOK-NUNALIVUT 2018 near Resolute, Nunavut, on 17 March 2018.

Source: Combat Camera



A member of 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group fishes during Operation NANOOK-NUNALIVUT in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, on 11 March 2018.

“Given the growing international interest and competition in the Arctic, continued security and defence of Canada’s Arctic requires effective safety and security frameworks, national defence, and deterrence.”



THREATS THROUGH THE CANADIAN ARCTIC: SITUATING THE ARCTIC IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

For nearly a century, Canada has invested in building and sustaining an international system that reflects its values and interests. A shifting balance of power and the re-emergence of major power competition now threatens to undermine or strain the established international order and rules-based system. China, as an emerging economic superpower, aspires to a global role proportionate to its economic weight, population, and self-perception as the Middle Kingdom. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s recent declaration that liberalism is “obsolete”⁸ affirms that his country has deviated from its early post-Cold War path, and its revisionist behaviour in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria exemplifies Russia’s willingness to test the international security environment. Consequently, Canada’s role is less obvious in the emerging multipolar world, which challenges the Western-designed security system, than it was in the bipolar Cold War order or the unipolar moment that followed. This creates more space for emerging state and non-state actors to exercise influence, including in the Arctic.

Within this broader context, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* highlights three key security trends that will continue to shape events: the evolving balance of power, the changing nature of conflict, and the rapid evolution of technology. All of those trends have direct and indirect application when contemplating and imagining future Arctic security environments, vulnerabilities, and requirements. Furthermore, Canada’s ANPF emphasizes the following:


The international order is not static; it evolves over time to address new opportunities and challenges. The Arctic and the North is in a period of rapid change that is the product of both climate change and changing geopolitical trends. As such, international rules and institutions will need to evolve to address the new challenges and opportunities facing the region. As it has done in the past, Canada will bolster its international leadership at this critical time, in partnership with Northerners and Indigenous peoples, to ensure that the evolving international order is shaped in a manner that protects and promotes Canadian interests and values.⁹



Source: Combat Camera

In a complex security environment characterized by trans-regional, multi-domain, and multi-functional threats, Canada must continue to work with its allies to understand the broader effects of the return of major power competition to the international system and to regions like the Arctic and what that means for Canadian defence relationships and partnerships. Emerging threats to North America, across all domains, must be situated in the context of continental defence and the longstanding Canada-US defence partnership exemplified by the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD). This binational command has proven effective in deterring, detecting, and defending North America's approaches since the 1950s, and it remains "the cornerstone of Canada's defence relationship with the US, and provides both countries with greater continental security than could be achieved individually."¹⁰ Resurgent major power competition and advances in weapons technology pose new threats to continental security, however, which require NORAD to modernize and evolve to meet current and future threats.

Both *Strong, Secure, Engaged* and the ANPF underscore the importance of NORAD modernization efforts, the integration of layered sensor and defeat systems, and improving the CAF's reach and mobility in the Arctic within this alliance construct. New commitments, however, will require creative thinking about infrastructure, surveillance and detection, interception capabilities, and command and control relationships. In light of advanced technologies and capabilities that adversaries can use to strike from multiple directions, NORAD has turned its focus to "all-domain" awareness, improved command and control, and enhanced targeting capabilities that can allow decision-makers to respond "at the speed of relevance."¹¹ US Northern Command/NORAD highlight the importance of advanced sensors that can detect, track, and discriminate advanced cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, hypersonics, and small unmanned aerial systems at full ranges (as well as the platforms that carry these weapons), as well as new mechanisms to defeat advance threat systems (including advanced cruise missiles capable of striking North America "from launch boxes in the Arctic").¹² Accordingly, talk of the



Members of the United States Navy and United States Coast Guard prepare to conduct a boarding exercise aboard HMCS GLACE BAY during Operation NANOOK-NUNALIVUT 2020 on 18 August 2020.

Source: Combat Camera

need to “harden the shield” to project a credible deterrent against conventional and below-the-threshold attacks on North America anticipates new Canada-U.S. solutions that will incorporate Arctic sensors and systems in a layered “ecosystem” of sensors, fusion functions, and defeat mechanisms.¹³ As NORAD commander General Glen VanHerck has recently emphasized, “through all-domain awareness, information dominance, and decision superiority, we will deter in competition, deescalate in crisis, and defeat in conflict.”¹⁴

Furthermore, Canada is working with its NATO allies to re-examine conventional deterrence and how to counter adversarial activities “below the threshold” of armed conflict in the Arctic. The statement in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* that “NATO has also increased its attention to Russia’s ability to project force from its Arctic territory into the North Atlantic, and its potential to challenge NATO’s collective defence posture” marks a measured shift in Canada’s official position. Despite Canada’s reticence to have the alliance adopt an explicit Arctic role over the past decade, the inclusion of this reference—as well as the commitment to “support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO”—indicates a newfound openness to multilateral engagement on “hard security” in the Arctic with its European allies. NATO is the cornerstone of both Danish and Norwegian defence and security policy, which also opens opportunities for enhanced bilateral relationships. How this newfound interest in NATO’s Arctic posture interacts with Canada’s longstanding preference to partner bilaterally with the US on North American continental defence remains to be clarified in the next decade.

THREATS TO AND IN THE CANADIAN ARCTIC: TOWARDS A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH

The growing realization of the disproportionate impact of anthropogenic climate change on the circumpolar region, and concomitant social, economic, and environmental consequences for the rest of the world, also commands global attention. Canada’s ANPF highlights that “the Canadian North is warming at about 3 times the global average rate, which is affecting the land, biodiversity, cultures and traditions.” This rapid change is “having far-reaching effects on the lives and well-being of northerners, threatening food security and the transportation of essential goods and endangering the stability and functioning of delicate ecosystems and critical infrastructure.” There is extensive Canadian interest in how those changes affect Northern peoples and the environment that sustains them at local and domestic scales as well as in the implications of rising international interest in the region. Although non-Arctic observers have traditionally confined their polar interest to scientific research and environmental issues, over the past decade significant international interest and attention has turned to oil, gas and minerals, fisheries, shipping and Arctic governance. In turn, that has generated debates amongst Arctic states about non-Arctic states’ intentions and their receptiveness to welcoming Asian countries in particular “into the Arctic cold.”¹⁵

Thus, while most Canadian analysts now downplay the probability of military and security threats to or in the Canadian Arctic over resources or sovereignty in a direct sense, globalization and growing interest in large-scale development of natural resources mean more activity in the Arctic. This generates a growing need to understand, monitor and react to activities affecting security. NATO’s 2017 Strategic Foresight Analysis notes that “the growing

number of stakeholders combined with the interconnected nature of the international system, the exponential rate of change and the confluence of trends has continued to increase the potential for disorder and uncertainty in every aspect of world affairs.”¹⁶ Accordingly, Canadians must look to more comprehensive approaches that accept and incorporate complexity and uncertainty.¹⁷

The ANPF observes that “the qualities that make the Canadian Arctic and North such a special place, its size, climate, and small but vibrant and resilient populations, also pose unique security challenges, making it difficult to maintain situational awareness and respond to emergencies or military threats when and where they occur.” Climate change compounds those challenges, reshaping the regional environment and, in some contexts and seasons, facilitating greater access to an increasingly “broad range of actors and interests” (both Canadian and international). Accordingly, the 2019 policy framework emphasizes that

to protect the safety and security of people in the region and safeguard the ability to defend the Canadian Arctic and North, and North America now and into the future, a multi-faceted and holistic approach is required. The complexity of the regional security environment places a premium on collaboration amongst all levels of government, Indigenous peoples and local communities, as well as with trusted international partners.¹⁸

Given the high proportion of Indigenous people (Inuit, First Nations and Métis) in Canada’s Arctic population, as well as Ottawa’s political focus on improving Indigenous–Crown relations and promoting reconciliation, the Canadian Arctic and North has a much higher political profile than simple population statistics and parliamentary representation numbers might suggest. As the *Arctic Human Development Report* notes, Indigenous peoples’ “efforts to secure self-determination and self-government are influencing Arctic governance in ways that will have a profound impact on the region and its inhabitants in the years to come.”¹⁹ Canadian reports highlight longstanding inequalities in transportation, energy, communications, employment, community infrastructure, health services, and education that continue to disadvantage Northerners compared to other Canadians. Furthermore, poor socio-economic and health indicators also point to significant gaps between Northern Canadian jurisdictions and their southern counterparts, elucidating higher rates of human insecurity in the Canadian Arctic. Accordingly, Canada’s defence and security policies and practices align with its broader national strategy for the Canadian Arctic and the Circumpolar North, which promotes “a shared vision of the future where northern and Arctic people are thriving, strong and safe.”²⁰

“STRONG AT HOME”: THE CANADIAN ARMY, THE ARCTIC, AND CONTINENTAL DEFENCE

Strong, Secure, Engaged explains how being “strong at home” requires domain and situational awareness through increased surveillance and monitoring, better information sharing with partners and allies, and more integrated land, air, and maritime capabilities to project force in the region. The rebranding of Operation NANOOK (the CAF signature operation delivering Arctic training, developing partnerships, and improving readiness) in 2018 to consolidate various operations and exercises under one operational banner reflecting year-round activities better reflects an integrated approach with key allies and partners.

To accomplish those ends, the Canadian military has a modest footprint in the Arctic. There are approximately 300 Canadian Armed Forces personnel stationed in Yellowknife with Joint Task Force (North), 440 (Transport) Squadron, and other units; approximately 1,400 Canadian Rangers serving in 64 communities across the territories with 1 Canadian Ranger Patrol Group (1 CRPG); and a small Primary Reserve unit in Yellowknife. The CAF Arctic Training Centre established in Resolute Bay, which is used to train soldiers in basic survival techniques and to serve as a hub for High Arctic exercises, and the deep-water Arctic docking and refueling facility in Nanisivik have no year-round military personnel. The longstanding Canadian Forces Station at Alert, on the northern tip of Ellesmere Island, and the North Warning System radar stations along the Arctic Ocean and Labrador Sea coasts, also represent part of the Arctic footprint. There are also NORAD forward operating locations (FOL) in Yellowknife, Inuvik, and Iqaluit (as well as a Royal Canadian Air Force FOL in Rankin Inlet).

In *Strong, Secured, Engaged*, the Government of Canada committed to acquiring next-generation surveillance aircraft, remotely piloted systems, and all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles, and larger tracked vehicles for use in the Arctic. National Defence has also announced the following steps to further improve the CAF’s presence and ability to operate in the Arctic:

- Modernizing CAF capabilities in the Arctic, including through the acquisition of six new Arctic and offshore patrol ships, and supporting the modernization of the Inuvik Airport runway.
- Launching the RADARSAT Constellation Mission in 2019, which enhances the CAF’s ability to monitor Canada’s maritime and northern approaches.
- Investing in a range of space capabilities, such as satellite communications that achieve global coverage, including in the Arctic.

- Launching the All Domain Situational Awareness Science and Technology Program in 2015 and a subsequent science and technology program to help find innovative solutions to address surveillance challenges in the North.

Cumulatively, these military modernization programs combine an element of strategic deterrence (effective on a global scale) and security capabilities designed to protect Arctic resources, disrupt illegal activity, and respond to humanitarian and natural emergencies on the national and sub-national scale. Canada plays a supporting role, within the contexts of its alliances with the U.S. and NATO more generally, in maintaining a global strategic ability by investing in its detection and deterrence capabilities that are based in or potentially will travel through the North American Arctic. To date, those are less about defence of the Arctic itself than about contributions to broader continental defence using forces or systems based in the Arctic.

The CAF must anticipate new risks and threats and develop the capability to project and sustain forces to deal with situations that fall across the entire spectrum of operations. The 2020 Arctic regional operations plan emphasizes that

the preponderance of CAF activities must consider the safety and security threats that stakeholders living and working in the [Canadian North] face every day. These activities must drive the CAF to build and possess the right balance of dual-purpose infrastructure and defence presence needed in order to deter and defeat threats that may use the Northern approaches to threaten North America while also enabling the conduct of safety and security missions.²¹

Because Canada does not face a credible land-based military threat to its Arctic, the Canadian Army's focus remains on safety and security missions that fit with a comprehensive [whole-of-government] approach as well as on constructive engagement with local populations. *Advancing with Purpose: The Canadian Army Modernization Strategy* observes the following:

The effects of climate change are perhaps most pronounced in the Arctic. Rising activity levels in Canada's Arctic by state and commercial actors raise the potential for safety and security-related challenges. These include search and rescue operations, response to natural or man-made disasters, and response to actions by states with interests in the Arctic. The Canadian Army must be ready to assist in addressing those challenges through exercises, cooperation with domestic partners, and by providing a physical presence when needed.²²

These missions also intersect with priorities identified by Northern Indigenous peoples. Their vested interests in Arctic sovereignty and security span the military, political, economic, social, and environmental sectors of security. "The inextricable linkages between issues of sovereignty and sovereign rights in the Arctic and Inuit self-determination and other rights require states to accept the presence and role of Inuit as partners in the conduct of international relations in the Arctic," Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (the Inuit national advocacy organization) explained in its ANPF partner chapter. "The foundation, projection and enjoyment of Arctic sovereignty and sovereign rights all require healthy and sustainable communities in the Arctic."²³ Accordingly, Canada's defence policy describes how "Indigenous communities are at the heart of Canada's North," and it commits "to expand and deepen our extensive relationships with these communities, particularly through the Canadian Rangers and Junior Canadian Rangers."

The Canadian Rangers are non-combat-oriented Reservists who serve as the military's eyes and ears across the North, providing valuable expertise and serving as critical enablers for Regular and Primary Reserve forces deployed north. Although the risk of an enemy land force incursion into the region is very low, Canada must have the capability to respond to such an implausible scenario (involving small numbers of enemy forces) should it arise. That requires scalable, agile forces that could respond to incursions—albeit highly unlikely—that target critical infrastructure or Northern populations. Four Primary Reserve (P Res) Arctic Response Company Groups (ARCG) based in Southern Canada are trained to respond to need year-round, at a notice to move suitable for routine operations. These ARCGs are dependent upon air support to deploy to and within the Arctic. Developing short-notice Arctic capabilities, in sub-unit strengths, remains an ongoing effort.

Ken Eyre noted in 1981 that "the most significant military characteristic of the Canadian North is not the climate; it is isolation!"²⁴ That remains true today. The lack of infrastructure in the Arctic exacerbates time and space factors, and investments that build national capacity to sustain deployments throughout the region heighten the probability of mission success. For strategic and mid-distance tactical mobility in remote regions, land forces rely on air transport, which means that improvements to airfields and their connectedness in an operational support hub-and-spoke model that enables more diverse air operations are highly relevant to the Canadian Army. It also means that equipment for short-notice Arctic operations must be transportable by aircraft that can operate reliably in the region. The ability to sustain land forces in the Arctic is also resource intensive. A robust and agile sustainment system must be carefully integrated with whole-of-government capacity and capabilities, must be sensitive to social and environmental conditions, and must avoid depleting the limited resources (both human and material) in local communities.



Source: Combat Camera

Members of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment deployed on Operation NANOOK-NUNALIVUT conduct loading drills with a CH-147F Chinook in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, on 2 March 2021.

CONCLUSIONS

Changing power dynamics in the Arctic are unlikely to derive from regional boundary disputes, resources, or regional governance in the next fifteen years and instead are more likely to be driven by broader international forces and dynamics. Accordingly, official threat assessments are warranted in emphasizing that Canada's Arctic faces no near-term conventional military threats—although resurgent strategic competition globally may have “spill over” effects on circumpolar security. In the case of the North American Arctic, observations or drivers associated with geostrategic competition at the *international* systemic level should not be misapplied to objective and subjective geographical assessments of the *regional* Arctic security environment.²⁵ Although the evolving international balance of power may undermine global peace and security, that is not necessarily a zero-sum game in terms of *Arctic* regional stability.

Rather than promoting a narrative of inherent competition or impending conflict, SSE emphasizes that “Arctic states have long cooperated on economic, environmental, and safety issues, particularly through the Arctic Council, the premier body for cooperation in the region. All Arctic states have an enduring interest in continuing this productive collaboration.” That last sentence suggests that Russia (described elsewhere in the policy document as a state “willing to test the international security environment” that had reintroduced “a degree of major power competition”) has vested national interests in a stable circumpolar region. Accordingly, the drivers of Arctic change in Canada's defence policy emphasize the rise of security and safety challenges *in* the Arctic rather than conventional defence threats *to* the Arctic, thus confirming the line of reasoning that has become well entrenched in defence planning over the last decade.²⁶ The defence policy document also highlights how international threats may pass *through* the Arctic to reach targets outside of the region.

The Arctic is inextricably tied to the rest of Canada, to North America, and to the international system as a whole. That interconnectedness brings opportunities for communities, governance, and economic development, and it also poses complex, multifaceted challenges. Accordingly, strategic forecasters must situate the Canadian Arctic in global, regional, and domestic contexts to anticipate new challenges, promote effective adaptations to changing circumstances, and identify how the military should be trained and equipped to act decisively in concert with its allies. Current discussions about the future of North American defence and security architecture, including new “ecosystem” approaches to integrating layered defences, anticipate a future where NORAD might achieve all domain awareness from the seabed to outer space and have the ability to fuse the data from those sensors into a common operating picture that decision-makers can use to defend against adversarial actions.²⁷ Although the full extent of Canada's contribution to continental defence modernization remains to be determined, the Arctic will inevitably factor heavily given that the polar region still represents the fastest avenue of approach to North America for various delivery systems emanating from major power competitors.²⁸

Anticipating and addressing twenty-first century challenges requires clear, coordinated action to leverage the broad and deep expertise of the modern state and civil society. In the defence and security realm, Canada's Arctic policy emphasizes that meeting “enormous collective challenges requires coordinated action across the whole-of-government—military capabilities working hand in hand with diplomacy and development.” That aligns with an ongoing operational role for land forces to support comprehensive approaches to safety and security in a domestic polar context, typically by supporting other government departments and agencies in fulfilling their mandates. Taken together, the opportunities, challenges, increased competition, and risks associated with a

more accessible (and unpredictable) Arctic make the future land operating environment complex and uncertain. *Advancing with Purpose* highlights that “modernizing the Army will not be simple and will require much thought and analysis based on threats, the character of future conflict and operations, and an unwavering dedication to ensuring our soldiers are trained.” It also emphasizes that “what we have held as immutable for decades may have to change as we take an honest look at what the future needs.”²⁹ As the international security environment becomes more turbulent, the Canadian Army must be adaptable, agile, and ready to operate effectively in all scenarios. In an Arctic context, that requires more fidelity in anticipating and preparing to address different threats through, to, and in Arctic regions. 🍁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Ph.D., is Canada Research Chair in the Study of the Canadian North and a professor in the School for the Study of Canada at Trent University. He is network lead of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN) and served as Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel of 1 Canadian Ranger Patrol Group from 2014–2020. His recent books include *The Joint Arctic Weather Stations: Science and Sovereignty in the High Arctic, 1946–72* (co-authored, forthcoming in 2021); *On Thin Ice? Perspectives on Arctic Security* (co-edited, 2021); and *Breaking Through? Understanding Sovereignty and Security in the Circumpolar Arctic* (co-edited, 2021).

The article is an expanded version of “Threats through, to, and in the Arctic: A Canadian Perspective” in *Perspectives on Arctic Security*, eds. Duncan Depledge and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 2021), 26–38.

ENDNOTES

1. Department of National Defence (DND), *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE): Canada's Defence Policy* (2017), 79, <http://dgpaapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.
2. Rob Huebert, “The New Arctic Strategic Triangle Environment (NASTE),” in *Breaking the Ice Curtain? Russia, Canada, and Arctic Security in a Changing Circumpolar World*, eds. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Suzanne Lalonde. (Calgary: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2019), 75–92.
3. Statement of General Terrence J. O’Shaughnessy before the Senate Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, 3 March 2020, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/O'Shaughnessy_03-03-20.pdf.
4. See P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “From ‘Defending Sovereignty’ to Comprehensive Security in a Whole of Government Framework: Government Narratives of Arctic Sovereignty and Security in the Harper Era,” in *Understanding Sovereignty and Security in the Circumpolar Arctic*, eds. Wilfrid Greaves and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 137–167.
5. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Canada’s Emerging Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: Confirming a Longstanding Northern Strategy,” in *Breaking the Ice Curtain? Russia, Canada, and Arctic Security in a Changing Circumpolar World*, eds. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Suzanne Lalonde (Calgary: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2019), 13–42.
6. Crown–Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC), *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF)*, 10 September 2019, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1560523306861/1560523330587>; Peter Kikkert and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Canada’s Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: A Roadmap for the Future?” *Arctic Yearbook 2019*, eds. Lassi Heininen, Heather Exner-Pirot, and Justin Barnes (Akureyri: Arctic Portal, 2019): 332–39, https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2019/Briefing-Notes/9_AY2019_BN_Kikkert_Lackenbauer.pdf.
7. CIRNAC, *ANPF: Safety, Security, and Defence Chapter*, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1562939617400/1562939658000>.
8. Lionel Barber, “Vladimir Putin says liberalism has ‘become obsolete,’” *Financial Times*, 27 June 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.
9. CIRNAC, *ANPF*.
10. Department of National Defence, North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), modified 3 April 2010, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/transition-materials/caf-operations-activities/2020/03/caf-ops-activities/norad.html>.
11. Andrea Charron, “Beyond the North Warning System,” *War on the Rocks*, 7 September 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/beyond-the-north-warning-system/>.
12. O’Shaughnessy to Senate Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, 3 March 2020. See also Nancy Teeple and Ryan Dean, eds., *Shielding North America: Canada’s Role in NORAD Modernization* (Peterborough: NAADSN Engage Series, 2021), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NAADSN-engage4-NORAD-NT-RD-upload.pdf>.
13. Terrence J. O’Shaughnessy and Peter M. Fesler, “Hardening the Shield: A Credible Deterrent & Capable Defense for North America” (Washington: Canada Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, September 2020), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Hardening%20the%20Shield_A%20Credible%20Deterrent%20%26%20Capable%20Defense%20for%20North%20America_EN.pdf.

14. Glen D. VanHerck, "Deter in Competition, Deescalate in Crisis, and Defeat in Conflict," *Joint Force Quarterly* 101/2 (2021): 10.
15. See, for example, P.E. Solli, E. Wilson Rowe, and W. Yennie Lindgren, "Coming into the Cold: Asia's Arctic Interests," *Polar Geography*, 36/4 (2013): 253–270; Kimie Hara and Ken Coates, eds., *East Asia-Arctic Relations: Boundary, Security and International Politics* (Waterloo: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2014); and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Adam Lajeunesse, James Manicom, and Frédéric Lasserre, *China's Arctic ambitions and what they mean for Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2018).
16. NATO, *Strategic Foresight Analysis Report 2017* (Brussels: NATO, 2017), https://www.act.nato.int/application/files/1016/0565/9725/171004_sfa_2017_report_hr.pdf.
17. On this theme, see Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv and Kara K. Hodgson, "Comprehensive Security in the Arctic: Beyond 'Arctic Exceptionalism,'" in *On Thin Ice? Perspectives on Arctic Security*, eds. Duncan Depledge and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 2021), 1–11, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Depledge-Lackenbauer-On-Thin-Ice-final-upload.pdf>.
18. CIRNAC, *ANPF*.
19. Joan Nymand Larsen and Gail Fondahl, *Arctic Human Development Report (AHDR-II)* (Copenhagen: Nordisk Ministerråd, 2015), <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:788965/FULLTEXT03.pdf>.
20. CIRNAC, *ANPF*. As non-state actors and non-Arctic state actors seek greater influence on Arctic affairs, the Government of Canada may also face challenges to its legitimacy and credibility. Furthermore, increasing polarization, regionalization, and fragmentation within North American society could deepen distrust in conventional politics and politicians, exposing vulnerabilities that are susceptible to outside influence and can be exploited to disrupt the social fabric and sow seeds of disunity. A declining sense of fate control, lingering anxieties about sovereignty, and concerns about an increasingly complex future could also prove sources of greater uncertainty and social and political division. In an increasingly globalized information and social media environment, adversaries are likely to use disinformation and misinformation strategies to influence Canadian opinion, undermine sources of strength, and complicate decision making in the Arctic and elsewhere. For a recent discussion, see Troy Bouffard and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Russian Arctic Strategies: Ambitions and Near-Term Expectations," NAADSN Ideas talk (by Zoom), 4 December 2020, <https://www.naadsn.ca/events/naadsn-ideas-series-russian-arctic-strategies-ambitions-and-near-term-expectations/>.
21. Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC), CAF Arctic Regional Operations Plan (AROP) 2020–2025, January 2020.
22. Canadian Army, *Advancing with Purpose: The Canadian Army Modernization Strategy*, 4th ed. (Ottawa: Canadian Army HQ, 2020), 7.
23. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, "ANPF: Inuit Nunangat" (September 2019), 1, <https://www.itk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/20190925-arctic-and-northern-policy-framework-inuit-nunangat-final-en.pdf>.
24. Ken Eyre, *Custos Borealis: The Military in the Canadian North, 1898–1975*, ed. P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 2020), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/custos-borealis-eyre-lackenbauer-NAADSNweb-jan20.pdf>.
25. Ryan Dean and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Geostrategy and Canadian Defence: From C.P. Stacey to a Twenty-First Century Arctic Threat Assessment," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 20/1 (2019): 1–64, <https://jmss.org/article/view/69488/53633>.
26. See, for example, Franklyn Griffiths, Rob Huebert, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Canada and the Changing Arctic: Sovereignty, Security and Stewardship* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011); Adam Lajeunesse and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "The Canadian Armed Forces in the Arctic: Building Appropriate Capabilities," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 16/4 (2016): 7–66; and P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Heather Nicol, eds., *Whole of Government through an Arctic Lens* (Antigonish: Mulroney Institute on Government, 2017).
27. See, for example, O'Shaughnessy and Fesler, "Hardening the Shield," and the series of reports by Ryan Dean and Nancy Teeple: "NORAD Modernization: Report One: Awareness & Sensors," Conference of Defence Associations (CDA) Institute, 16 September 2020; "NORAD Modernization: Report Two: Defeat Capabilities," CDA Institute, 29 September 2020; "NORAD Modernization: Report Three: JADC2/JADO," CDA Institute, 28 October 2020.
28. See Andrea Charron and Jim Fergusson, *NORAD: Beyond Modernization* (Winnipeg: Centre for Defence and Security Studies, 2019), https://umanitoba.ca/centres/cdss/media/NORAD_beyond_modernization_2019.pdf; and Charron, "Beyond the North Warning System."
29. Canadian Army, *Advancing with Purpose*, 1, 3.