



ARCTIC SECURITY BRIEFING PAPERS

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Good Governance and Arctic Security

Emerging security challenges in the Arctic require policies that squarely face changing conditions, strategic and environmental, but preserving the basic stability that still exists in the region must be a clear priority. Relying too heavily on military responses risks exacerbating rather than easing Arctic tensions, and it ignores the post-Cold War reality that vulnerability to military threats is linked as much to political as to military weakness. In other words, good governance at home – political stability, national unity, and ongoing public trust in the institutions of governance and accountability – and regional diplomacy should be at the core of Arctic security strategies.

To their credit, both the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN)¹ and the Senate Standing Committee on National Security, Defence and Veterans Affairs (SECD)² addressed emerging Arctic security challenges in separate 2023 studies. The NDDN report puts Arctic security in perspective: “For most witnesses, the security situation in the Arctic is characterized by peace, co-operation, stability and no imminent military threat” (NDDN, p. 12). But witnesses also warned of “the return of great power competition, the rapidly changing global security environment, and rising tensions with increasingly aggressive authoritarian, revisionist, and expansionist states” – all of which “threaten the status quo in the Arctic” (NDDN, p. 12).

One significant element of the unfolding geopolitical reality in the Arctic is the turn by major powers away from diplomacy³ and toward increased reliance on strategic messaging in its least nuanced form – that is, ever more provocative military demonstrations, exercises, and patrols in Arctic waters, including in each other’s strategic backyards.⁴

One side’s strategic military signaling is inevitably experienced by the other side as brazen and provocative, especially in the context of already rising tensions. And combining that with the cumulative military infrastructure upgrades on both sides of what has become the Arctic’s Russia/NATO divide, is likely to produce the classic security dilemma in which one side’s efforts to bolster its security through military initiatives prompts its adversary to reciprocate, driving mutually escalating threats that ultimately undermine the security of both.⁵ Furthermore, self-defeating military competition also ignores the central role of political stability at the national level in ensuring international security and protection against aggression.

Good governance as a key security asset

A review of three-plus decades of post-Cold War military hostilities reveals that big power military interventions, including major invasions, are carried out almost exclusively in contexts of chronic political instability, almost always in and around intractable trouble spots. States with deep and festering internal divisions, in which national governments have little or no internal legitimacy, are vulnerable to outside interference and invasion, in a way that stable, well-governed states are not. Interventions or attacks by major powers are obviously driven by a range of factors or ambitions, but the weaknesses that expose states to invasion are primarily political and governance failures, rather than a lack of military preparedness. A key post-Cold War reality is that no stable, well-governed states have been among those having suffered military attack by a major power.

The RAND Corporation's lengthy analysis of *Russia's Military Interventions*⁶ includes post-World War II Soviet invasions and, separately, Russian post-Cold War invasions or interventions from 1992 to 2018. The study concludes that the latter post-Soviet "military interventions have been concentrated almost exclusively in post-Soviet Eurasia." RAND analysts identify multiple reasons behind, or objectives pursued through, the interventions, including national status concerns, especially as a regional hegemon, maintaining relative power balances, and counter-terrorism. The most notable feature of the 25 military interventions undertaken by Russia from 1992 to 2018 is that, without exception, the context was conflict and dysfunction in the places where the interventions took place. Some were UN authorized peacekeeping operations beyond Eurasia (e.g. Angola, Sierra Leone, and Sudan/South Sudan), but enforcement and stabilization operations were conducted in Tajikistan during its civil war, in a divided Georgia's separatist enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in Moldova related to the Transnistria dispute, and in Ukraine's Crimea and Donbas region in the context of ongoing civil war. In addition, Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war, and since February 2022 has of course pursued major aggression against Ukraine. Here, too, the context was the civil war which Russia was already involved in and helping to foment, and the context of that war included political instability of more than two decades' duration. The RAND study makes no judgements about the legality, effectiveness, or wisdom of any of the interventions. The key point to recognize is that none of the invasions, or military interventions, was in a stable, well-governed state.

The same is true of the post-Cold War foreign interventions undertaken by the United States. The US Congressional Research Service produced a 2023 report on "Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2023."⁷ It documents essentially all instances of US military presence or activity beyond its borders, and many of the post-Cold War actions had the consent of a host government or were authorized by the UN. The better known, often more notorious, interventions were enforcement or stabilization operations, all of which were interventions into conflict zones. A sample list of the place names tells the story: Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Kuwait, Iraq (no-fly zone enforcement), Iraq invasion, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia re Kosovo, Haiti, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Central African Republic. The CRS report is comprehensive and detailed and focuses strictly on enumerating the interventions, without any comment on their merits.

Again, the most interesting part of the story of American post-Cold War military interventions is that all of them were in the context of conflict and dysfunction. Quite apart from the legality, effectiveness, or wisdom of any of the interventions, they were, without exception, not carried out against any stable, well-governed states.

The same pattern applies in the far fewer interventions by regional powers – for example, by Ethiopia in Somalia, or by Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Iraq's 1990 seemingly out-of-the blue invasion of a stable Kuwait appears to be the one exception (although boundary disputes between the two were longstanding,⁸ they were not the focus of the invasion). Azerbaijan would not characterize its 2020 44-day war⁹ to reclaim the Nogorno-Karabakh Armenian-majority enclave as an invasion, it was launched in the context of the instability of its ongoing dispute with Armenia. Common to all the invaded states, apart from Kuwait, were conditions of advanced internal division and crisis.

The point obviously is not that internal crises justify invasions. It's not a matter of blaming the victims and justifying the military adventures of major powers. Politically chaotic and conflict-torn states are still sovereign, and their weaknesses are typically the product of a myriad of forces—some internal, but many well beyond their control. Invading any state outside of self-defence or without explicit United Nations Security Council authorization remains a flagrant violation of international law.

The RAND and CRS studies show that states are vulnerable to attack/intervention by virtue of internal political instability, not a lack of military defence. And the primary lesson to be drawn is that stable and well-governed states with national institutions that enjoy the legitimacy that comes from broad public trust and support, are largely protected from military attacks and intervention, regardless of their military strength or the lack of it.

There were also, of course, no attacks on well-governed states that are close allies of a major power, whether in formal alliance, or within a major power's "sphere of influence." States that are dysfunctional and unstable while allied with a major power still show some vulnerability to invasion – but in that case, the intervention is more likely to be by the alliance leaders or partner (notably, Russia's intervention in Tajikistan, an ally in the Collective Security Treaty Organization,¹⁰ in the context of its civil war). Hence, good governance also has security relevance for protection against intervention by an alliance partner – in Canadian terms, one could characterize a security function of good governance as "defence against help."

The basic point is certainly not that major powers have sworn off self-interested exploitation of weaker states, but the international community's intolerance for 19th Century style territorial conquest, resources confiscation, or other overt violations of local sovereignty by force wherever and whenever it suits the powerful has changed behaviour. The rules-based international order is far from perfect, but it is a reality in the sense that it has gradually come to mean that attacks by one state on another have had to become much less direct (for example, relying more on tactics such as predatory investments in mining operations, or creating relations of dependence through schemes like "belt-and-road" investment policies or security assistance deals). And when attacks are more direct, interventions inevitably exploit localized disorder (for example, as already noted, Russia's exploitation of Ukraine's political instability to the point of fomenting civil war and then full-on invasion). Protection from either form of exploitation or attack can be enhanced through governance remedies: for example, effective national economic policies and constraints on foreign investment, and political and conflict mediation processes that earn the confidence of the population, build a national consensus, and avoid chronic political and social disorder. All easier said than done, but still more practical and doable than efforts to mount military defences against major power attacks.

Good governance as part of a national bulwark against sovereignty and territorial violations should find powerful resonance in the Arctic. While the prevailing strategic security discourse largely assumes that without overt, and often provocative,¹¹ demonstrations of military prowess, the Arctic would be defenseless. In fact, however, Arctic States of the geopolitical West, without exception, are in possession of a key proven defence against military invasion: namely, stable governance legitimized by a buoyant national consensus in support of each state's prevailing order. The same phenomenon should be relevant for the Baltic States which justifiably feel vulnerable to their Russian neighbours. The Baltics are basically well-governed spaces that score high in global peace and prosperity indexes (as do Western Arctic states),¹² and it is the legitimacy of their governments and public institutions that radically reduce their vulnerability to Russian interference and Moscow's claims that it is duty bound to come to the aid of disaffected Russian-speaking populations – meaning, a key focus of Baltic defence against invasion must be to maintain the loyalty of their Russian-speaking minorities.

Priority security measures for Arctic states should thus include policies designed to maintain constructive governance that continues to earn the support of all segments of their Arctic populations. That must especially include positive relations with, and inclusion of, indigenous populations in the region. Throughout the Arctic, a key security strategy should be to foster conditions that reinforce indigenous communities' understanding of their own futures and well-being as being inextricably linked to their respective host countries. Human security and public safety are heavily influenced by the region's infrastructure – and where it is woefully inadequate, indigenous communities bear the consequences. That represents a lack of good governance that risks growing disaffection with far away national capitals. Jessica Shadian, the president and CEO of Arctic 360, told a 2022 meeting involving indigenous corporate leaders that, while Arctic defence spending can help build up local infrastructure, it does not automatically address local economic and social needs. She thus emphasized the development of a "multi-user and multi-purpose infrastructure" for the north.¹³

It is the legitimacy of inclusive national political processes and economic/social well-being in the Arctic states, not mutual exchanges of military threats across the Russia/NATO divide, that help to entrench political stability and human security in the region.

Good governance is certainly also a key asset for any cyber security mission to combat misinformation and the political turmoil that “fake” news and social media provocations are meant to foment. Misinformation invasions allowed by cyber security breaches are most effective in societies and political cultures already riven by deep suspicions, hostility, and toxic political discourse. When denigration of the “other,” to the point of hatred, is a normal part of political life, divisive cyber misinformation intrusions find fertile political soil. Essentially cohesive societies – in which political differences are respectfully debated and tested in public and Parliamentary forums, where there are what are understood to be legitimate, fair elections, and in which there is basic trust in national institutions – enjoy powerful protections against hostile cyber interventions. Defenses against cyber abuses and interventions necessarily employ technical fixes, but coherent social/political defenses are also key.

Domain awareness is, of course, central to national security, with the added benefit that it also bolsters the good governance that reinforces security. Situation awareness is key to timely responses to public safety emergencies and for early warnings of emerging national security threats and military and cyber vulnerabilities, and thus helps to build confidence in national institutions. Situation awareness is especially important for Canada, given that fate has positioned it between two major adversaries. It is obviously important that Canada be in a position to reliably inform Canadians of credible threats and, just as important, to credibly assure Canadians when threats to national security are *not* present. Similarly, Canada must have reliable situation awareness to credibly assure its neighbouring friends and adversaries that no threats to their public safety or national security are present or emerging from within Canadian territory.

The Commander of the Canadian Navy, Vice Admiral Angus Topshee may have meant to damn with faint praise, but he did tell the Commons defence committee that he “wouldn’t say [that Canada’s] surveillance capability is poor” and then joined other witnesses in acknowledging that it needs improvement (NDDN, p. 27). The Arctic is a multi-domain environment – in addition to the prominent sea domain, there are obviously land and air domains, as well as space and cyberspace – and improvements in situational awareness are necessary, and anticipated, in all five.

The threats to which the House of Commons and Senate Committee reports point could over the years certainly move from prospective to imminent, and in worst case scenarios could escalate to Arctic combat. The only rationale policy response to the prospect of war in the Arctic is obviously prevention. There are no guarantees, except for the certainty that contemporary wars involving hostile major peers, once launched, offer only one assured outcome, and that is mutual destruction – and that guarantee is made all the more certain by the region’s extraordinary environmental vulnerabilities. Winning, in any meaningful sense, has been all but absent from major post-Cold War armed conflicts, and it can be reliably assumed that there would be no “winners” in an Arctic war, whatever the level of military preparedness.

In the face of rising tensions and emerging threats in the Arctic, there are few credible security policy alternatives to the sustained pursuit of measures to reduce tensions, to promote the “orderly settlement” of disputes,¹⁴ and prevent war. And those measures are all part of responsible governance that must be complemented by sustained diplomacy. Diplomatic priorities should include direct and transparent engagement with Russia regarding ongoing military operations and objectives, pan-Arctic discussions on the management of sea routes and the Central Arctic Ocean, along with reminders that the Ilulissat Declaration¹⁵ commits the five Arctic Ocean state signatories to peacefully resolving their differences, and the serious pursuit of strategic dialogue and arms control with Russia and China. Added to that should be military operations that seek to de-escalate tensions and are guided by the fundamental assumption that direct combat in the Arctic is utterly unthinkable. And NATO’s growing presence needs an Alliance deterrence strategy that also emphasizes strategic reassurance.¹⁶

Good governance in collaboration with northern indigenous communities in Canada and throughout the Arctic should be recognized and energetically pursued as a key means of enhancing Arctic security.

Notes

¹ “A Secure and Sovereign Arctic,” Report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence, Chair – The Hon. John McKay, April 2023, 44th Parliament, 1st Session.

<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/NDDN/Reports/RP12342748/nddnrp03/nddnrp03-e.pdf>

² “Arctic Security Under Threat: Urgent needs in a changing geopolitical and environmental landscape,” Report of the Senate Standing Committee on National Security, Defence and Veterans Affairs, Chair – The Hon. Tony Dean. June 2023.

https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/441/SECD/reports/2023-06-28_SECD_ArcticReport_e.pdf

³ In the Arctic in particular, Russia is currently absent from meetings of the Arctic Defence Chiefs of Staff, and that is exacerbated by the paucity of direct US/Russia engagement on strategic issues, including arms control.

⁴ Examples include Russian and Chinese naval patrols in the Bering Sea and near the Aleutian Islands;* the Russian frigate Admiral Gorshkov patrolling along the Norwegian coast from the Barents Sea to the North Sea;** the Russian missile cruiser Marshal Ustinov conducting anti-submarine warfare training in the Norwegian Sea; Russian forces test-launching a Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile from within the Norwegian exclusive economic zone and the White Sea.** US/NATO examples include anti-submarine warfare patrols in 2020 in the Barents Sea where Russian deterrent forces patrol;*** in 2023 the US Coast Guard vessel Healy – with US Navy and Air Force, as well as UK, officers on board – sailed from Kodiak, Alaska through the Chukchi and East Siberia Seas along Russia’s Arctic coast, then moved north of the Russian Franz Josef Land archipelago and Svalbard, ending at Norway’s Arctic port in Tromsø. Russia conducted a series of naval military exercises along the Healy’s route.****

*John Feng, “Russian and Chinese Navy Ships Spotted Less Than 100 Miles off U.S. Coast,” *Newsweek*, 27 September.

<https://www.newsweek.com/russian-chinese-navy-ships-spotted-less-100-miles-off-us-coast-1746669#:~:text=A%20group%20of%20Russian%20and%20Chinese%20warships%20were,and%20Beijing%27s%20second%20joint%20patrol%20in%2012%20months.>

**Operations listed in the CSIS *Arctic Military Tracker*. <https://arcticmilitarytracker.csis.org>

***Thomas Nilsen, “US nuclear subs makes port call in Tromsø to collect supplies: The U.S. nuclear-powered submarine ‘USS Washington’ is armed with cruise missiles and is tasked to patrol northern waters where Russian submarines sail out from the Kola Peninsula. *The Barents Observer*, 11 January 11, 2022.

<https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2022/01/us-nuclear-sub-armed-cruise-missiles-makes-port-call-tromso>

****Atle Staalesen, “American coast guard vessel is sailing into Russian Arctic Waters,” *The Barents Observer*, 18

September 2023. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/09/american-coast-guard-vessel-sailing-russian-arctic-waters-almost-same-time-moscow>

****Thomas Nilsen, “USCG Healy docks in Tromsø after joint voyage with Norwegian Coast Guard northeast of Svalbard,” *The Barents Observer*, 01 October 2023. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2023/10/uscg-healy-docks-tromso-after-trans-arctic-voyage>

⁵ Prof. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Canada Research Chair in the Study of the Canadian North, Trent University, told the House of Commons Committee that Canada should take care “to maintain Arctic peace and civility while supporting [its] principled stand against Russian aggression,” and to consider how the country and its allies can “avoid an increasingly destabilizing security dilemma vis-à-vis Russia in the Arctic.” (NDDN, p. 19)

⁶ Samuel Charap, Edward Geist, Bryan Frederick, John J. Drennan, Nathan Chandler, Jennifer Kavanagh, *Russia’s Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, RAND Research Report, 2021, www.rand.org/t/RR444-3.

⁷ “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2023,” Congressional Research Service, 7 June 2023, ReportR42738. <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

⁸ Harry Brown, “The Iraq-Kuwait Boundary Dispute: Historical Background and the UN Decisions of 1992 and 1993,” IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin October 1994. [https://www.dur.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research/research-centres/ibru-centre-for-borders-research/maps-and-databases/publications-database/Boundary--Security-Bulletin-\(Vol.-2-no.-3\).pdf](https://www.dur.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research/research-centres/ibru-centre-for-borders-research/maps-and-databases/publications-database/Boundary--Security-Bulletin-(Vol.-2-no.-3).pdf)

⁹ Mansur Mirovalev, Nagorno-Karabakh: How did Azerbaijan triumph over Armenia?, Al Jazeera, 22 December 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/22/nagorno-karabakh-how-did-azerbaijan-triumph-over-armenia>

¹⁰ Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), comprised of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. <https://en.odkb-csto.org/>

¹¹ When in November 2022 the US used a C-130 transport aircraft to demonstrate, on Norway's Arctic Andoya Island, that it could use a standard cargo air drop procedure to launch an air-to-surface cruise missile, the special operations commander declared, "**we are intentionally trying to be provocative without being escalatory**" (emphasis added), although he didn't explain how they separated the two. John Vandiver, "'Unconventional' delivery of US airpower in Arctic tailored to serve notice to Russia," *Stars and Stripes*, 09 November 2022. https://www.stripes.com/branches/air_force/2022-11-09/red-dragon-missile-norway-russia-7986361.html

¹² See the 2023 Global Peace Index. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/GPI-2023-A3-map-poster.pdf>

¹³ Jessica Shadian, "Arctic Sovereignty and Security Summit, Iqaluit, 3-4 October 2022. <https://arctic360.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/SHADIAN-PREPARED-REMARKS-FOR-ARTIC-SOVERIEGNTY-SECURITY-SUMMIT-3-October-Iqaluit-Nunavut-1.pdf>

¹⁴ 2008 Ilulissat Declaration, Adopted in Ilulissat, Greenland on 28 May 2008. <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2008-Ilulissat-Declaration.pdf>

¹⁵ Among other points, the Ilulissat Declaration says: "the law of the sea provides for important rights and obligations concerning the delineation of the outer limits of the continental shelf, the protection of the marine environment, including ice-covered areas, freedom of navigation, marine scientific research, and other uses of the sea. We remain committed to this legal framework and to the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims." 2008 Ilulissat Declaration, Adopted in Ilulissat, Greenland on 28 May 2008. <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2008-Ilulissat-Declaration.pdf>

¹⁶ Even fundamentally mainstream security analysis recognizes the shortcomings of deterrence: "Especially when dealing with a peer rival that believes it has a rightful claim to international status, it can be very difficult to merely threaten a potential aggressor into submission. Some form of reassurance is almost always part of any successful dissuasion strategy." Michael J. Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence," RAND Corporation, Perspective, 2018. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html>