



ARCTIC SECURITY BRIEFING PAPERS

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Shielding the Arctic from NATO's return to Territorial Defence

NATO Defence Ministers have signalled their intention to create a new north Atlantic Command, one with Arctic operations also in mind. Along with current deployments in the Baltic states and Poland, intensified air patrols on its eastern and northern flanks, European ballistic missile defence, and a new logistics command for Europe, this new command reflects NATO's shift from out-of-area missions and back to the Cold War priority of defending the territories of NATO member states. Whatever that shift means for Eurasian security writ large, alliance-dominated territorial defence preoccupations in the Arctic would bode ill for its evolving cooperative security framework.

NATO closed its Cold War Atlantic Command in 2002, and the current move to re-establish a modified version of it reflects renewed military interest in what was known as the GIUK Gap, the maritime area between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK. It is the gap through which Russia's Northern Fleet must pass to enter the central Atlantic and beyond, and it is also a potential vantage point from which to disrupt North American-European-Arctic sea lanes of communication.

The head of NATO's military committee, Gen. Petr Pavel of the Czech Republic, sounds the alarm, explaining that because there has been increased Russian naval activity in the northern Atlantic, and because of "the growing capabilities of countries like Russia and China," NATO has no option but to pay more attention to protecting sea lanes that are vital to European security.¹ NATO insists Russian patrols in the north Atlantic and Arctic have returned to Cold War levels,² and thus multiple warnings, some dire, about Russian assertiveness and NATO vulnerability have followed. The Commander of the US Sixth Fleet sees the North Atlantic as once again becoming an area of competition that amounts to "the start of the Fourth Battle of the Atlantic."³ Russia, on the other hand, was quick to label the proposed new Atlantic Command a return to the military competition modelled in the Cold War.⁴

While the more extreme rhetorical heights can be discounted, they ought not obscure the more moderate voices that agree that the combination of deteriorating relations with Russia and the latter's expanded maritime capacity and activity in the north Atlantic raises legitimate concerns about the long-term security of marine traffic in the north Atlantic and the European side of the Arctic⁵ – although it does say something about the imaginative paucity of alliance security planners that they are so readily drawn to reconstructing the Cold War's elaborate and costly (economically and politically) military responses to Russian recalcitrance. The new Canadian defence policy statement⁶ properly notes that "a credible military deterrent serves as a diplomatic tool to help prevent conflict *and should be accompanied by dialogue*" (emphasis added).

In the meantime, the new Atlantic Command is expected to be headquartered in the United States (although some in Scotland are vying for the honor⁷). Besides addressing maritime security, the renewed “Europe first” focus is also meant to reassure Baltic and east European allies, encouraging them to ignore President Donald Trump’s musings about the obsolescence of NATO⁸ or making the American commitment to NATO conditional on increased European defence spending.⁹ The NATO Association adds other hopes for the new command, expecting it to help members “demonstrate renewed commitment to the alliance, while also coming closer to achieving the 2 percent [military spending] target.”¹⁰

Territorial defence or public safety in the Arctic?

The move toward reactivated NATO operations in the north Atlantic Arctic inevitably raises the spectre of NATO operations in the Arctic. The more zealous strain of American hawks, like the American Lexington Institute (whose seemingly contradictory mission is to limit the role of the US federal government and to promote the projection of American power), see Russia as over-extended in the Ukraine, Syria, and the Arctic, and thus urge the West to take advantage – by deploying “new generations of polar icebreakers;” challenging “the Kremlin’s illegitimate claims to [unspecified] portions of the Arctic;” undertaking “new anti-submarine warfare exercises in northern waters with allies and friends such as the U.K., Norway, Canada and Sweden;” expanding US Army and Marine Corp exercises in the Arctic; and by “reinstating patrols by U.S. attack submarines in the Arctic.”¹¹ It’s the kind of appeal that might resonate in NATO members that were once part of the Soviet Union, and while more sober voices are likely to prevail in Brussels, some recent testimony at Canada’s House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN) has seconded the call for expanded military operations in the North, notably to include direct NATO involvement, not only in the North Atlantic, but also in the wider Arctic.

Prof. Alexander Moens of Simon Fraser University¹² emphasized the centrality of NATO in the face of a weakening US and a UN Security Council unable to come together on much of anything related to security, and encouraged Canada to become “a significant participant in securing the water and air approaches and access to the Arctic area as well as in securing the North Atlantic area.” Prof. Robert Huebert of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute¹³ told members of Parliament that he interprets the Government’s May 2017 defence policy as rejecting Canada’s traditional opposition to direct NATO involvement in the Arctic. He concluded that Canada is now ready to start talking to NATO about “the protection of the Arctic...and North Atlantic approaches.”

General appeals for heightened territorial defence of the Arctic are of course premised on fears that the Russian assertiveness seen in the context of Ukraine will now be visited on the Arctic. But, in fact, those fears did not make it into the new Canadian defence policy statement. It confines itself to three substantive references to Russia, only one of which is linked to the Arctic, and it specifically does not portray Russia as representing a threat to Arctic stability or security. It raises the GIUK Gap issue by noting NATO concerns that Russia is once again expanding its capacity to project force from the Arctic, not into other areas of the Arctic, but into the North Atlantic and further south.

That said, the defence statement certainly does not treat Russia as benign. It points to the “illegal annexation of Crimea,” notes Russia’s “willingness to test the international security environment,” and acknowledges the return of “a degree of major power competition... to the international

system,” but these are not presented as Arctic-related warnings. As noted earlier in this space, it’s especially revealing that the defence policy makes no reference to the Russian bomber threat¹⁴ – Russia is not singled out for concern in the context of the Arctic.

By now, of course, the changing Arctic is no longer news. The new defence policy thus links increasing security concerns to increasing ease of access to the region. Growing commercial interests, research, and tourism in the north confirm the Arctic as “an important international crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security meet.” Notably, the policy does not conclude that the rise in activity inevitably exacerbates traditional territorial defence concerns, but portrays security needs in terms of “increased safety and security demands related to search and rescue and natural or man-made disasters to which Canada must be ready to respond.”

Competition or cooperation?

Heightened activity in the Arctic, including China’s increasing investment and what will be increasing use of trans-Arctic sea routes, highlights the imperative to cooperate in the Arctic. A compelling new analysis of Arctic Security by Canadian scholar Heather Exner-Pirot and analyst Robert W. Murray¹⁵ notes that “a narrative of competition has dogged the Arctic region in the popular media, with suggestions that the Arctic states, and especially the Arctic Five littoral states (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States) have been ‘racing’ to claim large swathes of extended continental shelf and exploit the large deposits of hydrocarbon and mineral resources.” They remind us, however, that more than 90 percent of the Arctic’s hydrocarbon resources are within accepted territorial seas or national exclusive economic zones, making the competition narrative rather overblown. In fact, Arctic states have largely compatible interests. More importantly, they note that both history and international relations theory “suggest that states, especially great powers such as the United States and Russia, will attempt to maximize their strategic and economic advantages when the opportunity presents itself, but will not make decisions that significantly increase the risk of conflict unless their survival is threatened.” As a result, shared interests in the Arctic have led to the development of “a robust international society negotiated to uphold Arctic states’ interests based on a set of primary and secondary institutions that foster collaboration and information sharing, while establishing a unique Arctic balance of power.” They argue that the five Arctic littoral states in particular “all stand to benefit from a stable, peaceful, and accessible ocean, whereas instability would threaten their economic and strategic advantages.” Arctic self-interest counsels cooperation, not militarized competition.

Averting conflict and maximizing self-interest requires the further maturation of pan-Arctic governance, not expanded military forces. Two Russian academics, reflecting the sense of the Arctic as a zone of shared interests, argue for an Arctic legal regime to “regulate regional economic activity and satisfy the interests of stakeholders, including non-Arctic states.”¹⁶ The December 2017 *Scientific American* also recounts the many ways in which competition on the Arctic global commons would affect fishing, oil exploration, mining, navigation, and national security, and then calls for competition to give way to a region-wide “treaty that governs how we use this valuable region.”¹⁷ And Exner-Pirot and Murray point out that the Arctic is in fact remarkably advanced in developing a common Arctic approach to regional regulation and governance.

In 2010, pre-Ukraine NATO adopted its current Strategic Concept and clearly understood then that the alliance had no relevance for the Arctic. Indeed, they saw fit to not make any reference to the Arctic. Only half a decade old, the current Strategic Concept ignores the Arctic and describes the Euro-Atlantic area in radically different terms than those now dominating public discourse. Europe was then “at peace” and the key ongoing threats to peace and security were described as: the worldwide accumulation of modern military capabilities, including ballistic missiles; the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and their means of delivery; terrorism and the rise of extremist groups; and instability beyond NATO’s borders (leading to a major emphasis on out-of-area operations). Additional threats included cyber attacks, the vulnerability of communication and trade links, new weapons technologies, and environmental and resource constraints.

NATO countries were able to state collectively: “The Alliance does not consider any country to be its adversary.” In the Arctic, the eight states of the Arctic Council continue to say the same thing, the five Arctic Ocean states having said that formally in 2008 through the Ilulissat Declaration.

The geopolitical changes that directly affect countries with territory in the Arctic have occurred in their European context, not in the Arctic. Sovereignty and territorial integrity challenges in the Arctic are no greater today than they were in 2010 (acknowledging that Norway with its land border with Russia is not likely to feel quite as sanguine). The dangers of land or sea grabs outside of the parameters of the Law of the Sea or of the emerging international fisheries and other regulatory agreements, have not changed since 2010. NATO member states have always understood that traditional national security and sovereignty issues in the Arctic would be managed at the national level, not at a collective security level. NATO has been understood to remain focused on Europe and global conflict zones (like Afghanistan and Libya). And in the unlikely event of an attack on any member state, Arctic 5 was relied on to guide national responses. Even Canada and the US, with a long-standing joint command in North America through NORAD, have always retained full national control over surveillance and responses within their respective territories under normal peacetime conditions.

The idea that an overt NATO presence in the Arctic would induce Russia to become more cooperative, or more acquiescent to Western leadership, in the Arctic is no more credible than the notion that NATO’s eastern expansion to Russia’s borders and into its traditional sphere of influence would make Russia acquiescent in the face of the West’s efforts to envelope Ukraine and Georgia. The insertion of NATO into Arctic affairs is thus a recipe for heightened Arctic tensions and is bound to inflict serious harm to Arctic cooperation. Canadian Parliamentarians, for example, have heard expressions of hope that Sweden and Finland might join NATO – even when that would seriously undermine multilateral cooperation in the Arctic. In considering the possibility of Sweden and Finland acceding to NATO, Prof. Huebert agreed that the current success within the Arctic Council would probably not be sustained – calling that an “unfortunate casualty,” but a price worth paying: “we need to be preparing for this eventuality.”¹⁸ In other words, Canada should be prepared to sacrifice its vital interest in ongoing cooperation through the Arctic Council in favor of expanding NATO in the Arctic.

Avoiding the European “error” in the Arctic

Two decades ago, an extraordinary group of American academics, along with former legislators, officials, diplomats, and military leaders, warned then President Bill Clinton that the US-led eastern expansion of NATO was a “policy error of historic proportions,” that it would make Europe less secure and less stable. They said it would undermine those in Russia who favored reform and greater cooperation with the West. Thus, they recommended that the moves toward expansion be suspended in favor of alternative actions. The latter included continued arms reductions (nuclear and conventional), greater transparency in military deployments, enhanced NATO-Russia cooperation, emphasis on the Partnership for Peace program, and enhanced economic and political cooperation with Eastern Europe.¹⁹

The failure of official Washington and its NATO allies to heed that advice has in fact had the predicted consequences of historic proportions. The University of Antwerp’s Tom Sauer traces the origins of the Ukraine crisis. Given Russia’s historic links with the Ukraine as a member state of the former Soviet Union, he writes, and given that Crimea was a part of Russia until 1954 when it was granted to the Ukraine, and given Russia’s major port at Sevastopol in Crimea, it should have been obvious that Ukraine could not be peaceably folded into an anti-Russia political/military sphere. As Chris Westdal, a former Canadian ambassador to Russia and to the Ukraine told the NDDN:

“Like them or not, ...major powers’ spheres of influence are real. We Canadians know that. We live in one. In the real world, Kiev has about as much freedom to undermine Moscow’s security as Ottawa has to undermine Washington’s.”²⁰

The lessons for the Arctic should be clear. The American Committee for East-West Accord²¹, whose Board members include former US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and former Senator Bill Bradley, draws on a broad range of Americans from business, academia, government service, science, law, and other professions to warn of the dangers of the new cold war between the NATO and Russia. The group’s “fundamental premise is that no real or lasting American, European, or international security generally is possible without essential kinds of stable cooperation with Russia.” James Carden, executive editor for the Committee and correspondent for *The Nation*, recalls Mikhail Gorbachev’s vision of a common European home²² and argues that the continued deterioration of relations between the West and Russia mean that “now is the time to rethink the failed policies of the past and begin to consider reasonable alternatives to yet another round of NATO expansion that would take into consideration the security concerns of all.”²³

The Arctic is a good place to focus on the reasonable alternatives. Exner-Pirot and Murray demonstrate that the “negotiated exceptionalism” of the Arctic constitutes just such an alternative – and it’s already well underway. Creating an operational NATO presence in the Arctic would not be the way to reinforce existing regional stability. And on this, the defence policy statement, despite a balanced portrayal of Russia, moves in the wrong direction. It promises “joint exercises with Arctic allies and partners and support[s] the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO” (p. 113), thereby essentially denying the hard reality that Arctic security imperatives mean pan-Arctic, not alliance-centered, cooperation is fundamental. The statement refers to military cooperation with “allies and partners” (p. 57), a reference that needs to be expanded to mean all Arctic partners – and in the Arctic Council context, Russia is in fact a partner. As argued here before,²⁴ it should by now be clear that NATO is not the institutional vehicle

through which to pursue mutuality and stability in a region that includes a still cooperative Russia. Acknowledging and collectively responding via NATO to naval vulnerabilities in the North Atlantic does not translate into a requirement for direct NATO presence in the high Arctic.²⁵

Canadian analyst Ariel Shapiro, a former policy analyst with the Federal Government, in a critical essay on the utility of NATO, observes that “NATO has contributed to securitizing the Arctic and perpetuating a Cold War narrative that turns an economic and environmental situation, for which legal dispute resolution mechanisms exist, into a potential military conflict.”²⁶ Russia makes no claim on Canadian territory and does not present a threatening military posture toward Canada (or any other Arctic Council state). In the Arctic, Canada’s primary sovereignty concern is maintaining and having other states recognize its sovereignty over all the islands of its Arctic Archipelago and the waters that surround them²⁷ - and the chief challenge to that sovereignty does not come from NATO’s erstwhile and re-emergent adversary, namely Russia, but from its most powerful NATO ally, namely the US.

In the meantime, “NATO pushes Canada into a conflict mindset with Russia, thus making cooperation on the Arctic (a core Canadian interest) more difficult...”²⁸ Membership in NATO pushes Canada toward accepting the apparent NATO priority of confronting Russia in Europe at the expense of improved relations with Russia in the Arctic.²⁹ All that, despite the obvious fact that it is in Canada’s vital interest to maintain constructive Arctic relations with this most influential and consequential of Arctic neighbors.

As Mark Sedra, the President and Research Director of the Canadian International Council told the NDDN, “let’s not securitize the Arctic based on what’s happening elsewhere. Let’s not apply the lens of Ukraine to the Arctic, because the Arctic is one area where there’s been a surprising array of agreement and cooperation between Russia and the United States.”³⁰

NATO’s expansion and military stance in Europe has aggravated tensions with Russia, prompted a dangerous gambit in the Ukraine with no prospect for returning Crimea to Kiev, continues to feed Russian paranoia about the west, and allows Vladimir Putin to cast himself as the defender of Russian honor in the face unrelenting hostility. There is no advantage in staging an Arctic version of that costly melodrama.

Notes

¹ Robin Emmott, “Echoes of Cold War as NATO mulls new North Atlantic command,” Reuters, 06 November 2017. <https://uk.reuters.com>.

² Samuel Osborne, “Russian naval activity in Europe ‘exceeds Cold War levels’ says NATO admiral,” The Independent, 10 April 2017. <http://www.independent.co.uk>

³ Ian Keddie, “Canadian Forces Track Russian Subs as New Cold War Brews Under the Atlantic,” 15 November 2017. <https://www.vice.com>

⁴ NATO creates new military command structures under Cold War-era blueprints – Russian envoy,” TASS Russian News Agency, 10 November 2017. <http://tass.com>

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- ⁵ Michael Byers and Andrea Charron in recent testimony before NDDN, 22 November 2017. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/meeting-71/evidence>
- ⁶ “Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy,” Department of National Defence, June 2017. <http://dgpaapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/index.asp>
- ⁷ Ben Borland, “SNP calls for North Atlantic Command to be located in Scotland despite referendum threat,” *Express*, 26 November 2017. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/884403/SNP-calls-Nato-new-North-Atlantic-located-Scotland-independence-referendum>
- ⁸ D'Angelo Gore, “What’s Trump’s Position on NATO?” FactCheck.Org, 11 May 2016. <http://www.factcheck.org/2016/05/whats-trumps-position-on-nato/>
- ⁹ Krishnadev Calamur, “NATO Shmato? Donald Trump’s apparent rejection of the cornerstone of global security after World War II has stunned U.S. partners in the alliance.” *The Atlantic*, 21 July 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/07/trump-nato/492341/>
- ¹⁰ Touraj Riazi, “Testing your own Credibility: NATO’s New Atlantic Command,” The NATO Association of Canada, 22 November 2017. <http://natoassociation.ca/testing-your-own-credibility-natos-new-atlantic-command/>
- ¹¹ Daniel Gouré, “US and NATO Need an Arctic Strategy to Counter Russia,” RealClear Defense, 08 November 2017. <https://realcleardefense.com>
- ¹² Alexander Moens, Evidence, House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN), 06 November 2017. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/meeting-68/evidence>
- ¹³ Robert Huebert, Evidence, House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN), 06 November 2017. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/meeting-68/evidence>
- ¹⁴ Ernie Regehr, “Arctic Security and the Canadian Defence Policy Statement of 2017,” *Disarming Arctic Security*, The Simons Foundation, 31 August 2017. <http://www.thesimonsfoundation.ca/projects/arctic-security-briefing-papers>
- ¹⁵ Heather Exner-Pirot and Robert W. Murray, “Regional Order in the Arctic: Negotiated Exceptionalism”; in a special 2017 issue of the Danish journal POLITIK, published in cooperation with The Arctic Institute on “Arctic International Relations in a Widened Security Perspective.” <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-international-relations-widened-security-perspective/>
- ¹⁶ Nadezhda Filimonova and Svetlana Krivokhizh, “A Russian Perspective on China’s Arctic Role,” *The Diplomat*, 27 September 2017. <http://thediplomat.com>
- ¹⁷ “Without a Treaty to Share the Arctic, Greedy Countries Will Destroy It,” December 2017, *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com>
- ¹⁸ Rob Huebert, “Canadian Defense Review Depicts Russia as an Arctic Adversary,” *Arctic Deeply*, 04 July 2017. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/arctic/community/2017/07/04/canadian-defense-review-depicts-russia-as-an-arctic-adversary>
- ¹⁹ “Former Policy-Makers Voice Concern over NATO Expansion,” *Global Beat*, Boston University, 26 June 1997. <https://www.bu.edu/globalbeat/>
- ²⁰ Chris Westdal, Evidence, House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN), 23 October 2017. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/meeting-63/evidence>

²¹ Mission Statement of The American Committee for East-West Accord. <https://eastwestaccord.com/mission-statement/>

²² Articulated by Gorbachev in his 1989 speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/address_given_by_mikhail_gorbachev_to_the_council_of_europe_6_july_1989-en-4c021687-98f9-4727-9e8b-836e0bc1f6fb.html

²³ James Carden, "Is Now the Time to Consider Expanding NATO?" *The Nation*, 31 October 2017. <https://www.thenation.com/article/is-now-the-time-to-consider-expanding-nato/>

²⁴ "Arctic Security and the Canadian Defence Policy Statement of 2017" (2017).

²⁵ It's a point made by Professors Michael Byers and and Andrea Charron in recent testimony before NDDN, 22 November 2017. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/meeting-71/evidence>

²⁶ Ariel Shapiro, "NATO of Necessary, But Not Necessarily NATO," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, October 2017. http://www.cgai.ca/nato_if_necessary_but_not_necessarily_nato

²⁷ Ariel Shapiro (2017).

²⁸ Ariel Shapiro (2017).

²⁹ Ariel Shapiro (2017)

³⁰ Mark Sedra, Evidence, Standing Committee on National Defence, 20 November 2017. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/meeting-70/evidence>