

“Arctic Security: “How best to apply the windfall?”

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Oct 2/26

CPG/CIPS Conference

“Canada and the Middle Power Challenge”

The theme for this panel rightly refers to the fourfold increase in annual DND funding over the decade^{1,2} as a “windfall.” For many other federally funded programs, it’s the opposite. They experience the DND windfall as ongoing cuts and austerity.

For the economy and tax payers, it’s a mounting national debt and a boost to militarized industry that will ultimately be left to compete in the global arms market to survive. Former clerk of the Privy Council Alex Himelfarb recently asked in the *Toronto Star*, what we are giving up and what we will become:

“when we spend more than we have ever contemplated on the military? We are giving up on peacekeeping which we virtually invented. We are cutting back on aid and diplomacy. What are the implications of the militarization of our economy and foreign policy? What kind of Canada are we building?”³

And we end up with a security strategy that leaves us with more than a few questions:

-There are questions about the process by which the current path was chosen. It was hardly a model of democratic decision-making: conceived, as

it was, not in Parliament or in response to thorough, participatory public consultations and rigorously independent threat assessments. Instead it emerged from the military-centric halls of NATO, their climate of mutually reinforced crisis, and, to an embarrassing extent, in response to the arbitrary harangues of an erstwhile, mercurial, ally and putative alliance leader.⁴

-We are also left to question the government's understanding of the foundations of security. To be sure, it rightly assumes that a capable and prepared military plays a key security role, and I'll say more about that, but it forgets that peace and security are built, as this gathering well knows, on so much more; indeed, common security and human security ultimately depend on the very programs now being cut – notably, diplomacy, development and humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, and arms control.

-Then there is the question of sustainability: in the long run the economic burden is bound to weigh more heavily. Although, it's a burden that could yet provide an off-ramp. As costs rise, so will calls, here and in other NATO countries, for some sober second thoughts, especially after January 2029.^{5,6}

But here we are, and while the Government and DND have yet to provide anything close to a comprehensive plan, or rationale, for the 3.5% plus 1.5% of GDP defence spending windfall, the Arctic is routinely cited as a region of particular need. That is rightly a broadly accepted view, but it still begs

the question of what we are really talking about when we talk about Arctic security?

What we're **not** talking about are direct military threats to Canadian territory.⁷ Of course, in the European Arctic, security planners are rather more wary, and in principle, security planning is a never-say-never world where unexpected things can happen. So security planners are tasked to prepare, as much as is possible, for surprises. But they're also tasked to assess likelihood and to set priorities. The point is, invasion threats are not what drive Arctic defence upgrades.

The most immediate military need in today's North American Arctic is to improve situation awareness – with awareness itself being a form of defence and deterrence. The more adversaries expect that any hostile actions toward North America would be immediately detected and responded to, the greater their caution. And Canada builds trust when its leaders can reliably assure the population, and our neighbours, of the absence of threats, and reliably provide early warning when threats emerge.

Current surveillance gaps mean such assurances aren't as credible as they should be – that's particularly serious when tensions and suspicions run high.

And as the Arctic becomes more accessible, Canada needs to become more aware of happenings throughout its northern territory. So, in 2022, before the current elevated spending commitments, the government designated

\$38.6 billion (over two decades⁸) for NORAD Modernization, much of which is directed towards closing the Arctic surveillance gaps.

Measures taken include:

- a) Acquisition of Arctic and Polar Over-the-Horizon Radars (A-OTHR, P-OTHR);^{9,10}
- b) early warning and control aircraft (GlobalEye¹¹);
- c) Maritime surveillance aircraft (P-8A Poseidons to replace CP-140 Auroras)
- d) Longer-term changes include enhanced satellite air and sea surveillance;¹²
- e) Under-water surveillance sensors (stationary and self-propelled) to detect surface and subsurface vessel intrusions.^{13,14,15,16,17}

Of course, while awareness and detection on their own do enhance security, the point is obviously also to enable defence.

Emerging ***hypersonic and advanced cruise*** missile technologies certainly complicate defence efforts, illustrating both the need for and limits to active defence. Protection is a sovereign responsibility, but credible defence also means recognizing the real-world limits on what is possible.

It is the prospect of conventionally-armed versions of hypersonics that has become especially worrying to North American military planners. Nuclear

armed variants are viewed to be deterred by nuclear retaliatory threats (MAD), but limited conventional attacks on, for example, individual infrastructure sites are deemed not to be amenable to nuclear deterrence, making active defence the only option. But others rightfully question that logic, pointing out that any such attack on North America would immediately trigger NATO's Article 5 – as it did on 9-11. In other words, deterrence still applies.

The search for defences against hypersonic missiles is nevertheless part of Canada's NORAD modernization efforts (Peggy referred to this earlier as the non-strategic element of missile defence).^{18,19} As is well reported and understood, however, and as experts point out, that's easier said than done. The maneuverability of hypersonic systems means unpredictable flight lines and destinations; the speeds with which they approach within the atmosphere mean that, once detected, little time remains to intercept them, or for layered defence; and the fact that they can be launched from ships and aircraft means the Arctic is only one line of possible attack – they could come from any direction. There will be no defence dome, golden or otherwise, that will provide continent-wide protection from them. Instead, defence would have to be pursued through point defence systems at many selective sites deemed to be likely targets at extraordinary cost).

These kinds of attacks, as already noted, rank very low on the probability scale. And defences are still very much an R&D project, and, by multiple accounts, are likely to remain more an aspiration than a reality.

More likely security challenges come in the form of **“grey zone” or “hybrid” security vulnerabilities**. These demand their own analysis, and I can only allude to some obvious examples, like cyber attacks on infrastructure, dual use or ambiguous marine research operations, vandalizing undersea cables, misinformation, assassinations (which Tariq called “state terrorism”), and so on.

Finally, the security concerns and responses of the **indigenous populations in the Arctic** represent another kind of urgency.²⁰ This past summer the Inuit Circumpolar Council released the 2026 ICC Iqaluit Declaration.²¹ It addresses a wide range of issues, including the pointed reaffirmation of its landmark 1977 resolution which envisions an Arctic “Zone of Peace.” That was a decade before Gorbachev made a similar call and ahead of Mary Simons’ clear 1989 assertion that “we do not wish our traditional territories to be treated as a strategic military and combat zone between eastern and western alliances.”²²

But current East-West militarization does in fact treat the traditional, national, territories of Inuit and other indigenous homelands as a theatre of strategic competition, conflict, and potential combat. Furthermore, as calls for a zone of peace make clear, any responsible pursuit of Arctic security has to face up to the extraordinary vulnerability of the Arctic environment, physical and human, and the unacceptable damage that would be inflicted on it by actual combat. In fact, an interesting legal study from 2012 makes the point that the inevitability of such damage could render virtually any war-fighting in the Arctic a violation of International Humanitarian Law.²³

Put another way, war in the Arctic can never be won and thus must never be fought.

That makes war prevention and the return to greater regional cooperation a matter of urgency and the key Arctic security imperative. And that in turn calls for substantially strengthened capacity in diplomacy – an indispensable tool by which rising tensions and arms races can finally be reversed. And that can't happen without engaging all the states of the region, notably the state that comprises more than half of the region – namely, Russia.

Responding to perceived threats and insecurities with a primary focus on posing counter threats to deter an adversary (conventional deterrence) is inevitably escalatory and further entrenches the sense of insecurity and vulnerability – the classic security dilemma. In the long run, security and well-being in the Arctic will be found in strategic dialogue, in national common security postures that recognise that one's own security is bolstered when neighbours and adversaries also feel secure. A climate of stability emerges out of the persistent pursuit of inclusive, rules-based, regional governance arrangements that focus on the well-being of the people and communities of the region, and on respect for the lands and waters where they live – all projects eminently worthy of a funding windfall.

EndNotes

Notes not part of presentation

And hovering over the region, as they do over the entire planet, are two familiar, persistent, and existential threats: climate change and nuclear weapons (now we seem to be adding unrestrained AI to the list).

The Arctic already shows the scars of rapid climate change and nuclear weapons – the legacy Russia’s past testing and preparations for contemporary testing;²⁴ while combined increases in Russia’s SSBN patrols and NATO’s ASW patrols add to regional tensions.²⁵

Ukraine War and Arctic:

Russia has removed mobile air-defence (S-300 and S-400) systems from Severodvinsk – the speculation is that they have gone to southern Russia that is more in range of Ukrainian attacks.²⁶

Multilateralism in the Arctic:

Three Arctic States (Canada, Norway, Finland) signed on to the “Commitment to Multilateralism” statement initiated by Canada and others (PM website, Sept 21/26) speaks of the “triple planetary crisis of climate emergency, biodiversity loss, and pollution...” [and] emerging technologies (AI). And in response, and in support of multilateralism, they say the world needs “more effective provision of global public goods” and thus pledge themselves “to work together to reform and strengthen multilateral institutions, in particular the United Nations..., so they are better able to prevent conflict, respond to crises, deliver sustainable development, promote fair trade, protect human rights and the rule of law, and address existing and emerging global challenges.”

Excellent and welcome words and intentions – and it’s worth monitoring implementation. How for example will the Arctic states give substance to those intentions in the Arctic?

Escalating patrols in Arctic:

Swedish, British, American Rivet Joint “(intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions by specialized RC-135V/W Rivet Joint aircraft) patrols in quick succession near the Kola Peninsula in intelligence gathering operations. Norway doesn’t allow such missions on its territory near the Kola.²⁷ The previous day Russia had fired an Oniks.

References

¹ A fourfold increase - from \$34 billion in 2024-2025 to \$150 billion (5% of GDP) roughly by 2035. Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces 2026-27 Departmental Plan: <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/departmental-plans/departmental-plan-2026-27.html#spending>

² David Pugliese, “How will Canada reach its new defence spending commitments? Facing pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Mark Carney has pledged the country will spend \$150 billion annually on defence and security. *Ottawa Citizen*, 26 June 2025. <https://ottawacitizen.com/public-service/defence-watch/canada-defence-spending-nato>

³ Reference by Lloyd Axworthy on Substack: <https://substack.com/home/post/p-215512693>

⁴ Aptly described by Bob Rae as “a predatory hegemon whose regime in its second incarnation has demonstrated unprecedented corruption and a compulsion to destroy the cooperative ways of being and co-existing that have undergirded Canada-US relations for decades. Bob Rae, “Read his lips!”, *Toronto Star*, September 4/5, 2026.

⁵ Mr. Crney's promise: CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/9.6810744>

NATO's promise: "The trajectory and balance of spending under this plan will be reviewed in 2029, in light of the strategic environment and updated Capability Targets. <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/defence-expenditures-and-natos-5-commitment>, 29 June 2026

⁶ Eric Reguly, "There is no easy way for NATO countries to afford massive defence spending hikes," *Globe and Mail*, Sept 7/26.

⁷ Canada's *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (2019), "While Canada sees no immediate threat in the Arctic and the North...", pdf p.74.

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DND, *Evaluation of Arctic Operations* (2024) "Evidence offers that there is no immediate military threat to the Arctic."

Strategic Analysis Network: "Sovereignty and Security in the Canadian Arctic: Who Should We Be Wary of?" November 2025. Frédéric Lasserre, Mathieu Landriault, Pauline Pic, Stéphane Roussel

Policy Options: "Why Canada needs Arctic threat modelling now" (2025), Andrew Latham – "Russia will continue predictable, low-level probes...calibrated to test Canada's surveillance and response capabilities without crossing escalation thresholds." "China will pursue "science-first" and "commerce-first" projects to generate military-relevant data..."

⁸ National Defence, <https://apps.forces.gc.ca/en/defence-capabilities-blueprint/project-details.asp?id=2302>

The \$38.6 billion covers the following: internal services (1.18), surveillance/early warning (6.96), technology-enabled decision making (4.13), aerospace deterrence and defeat (6.38), infrastructure (15.68), research and development (4.23).

<https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/services/operations/allies-partners/norad/norad-modernization-project-timelines.html>

National Defence, "Annex C: Canada's NORAD Modernization Plan," Apr 17/24.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/north-strong-free-2024/annex-c-canada-norad-modernization-plan.html>

⁹ Arctic Over-the-Horizon Radar Project — Clearview Receiver Site <https://iaac-aeic.gc.ca/050/evaluations/proj/90610>

This link is a detailed report – including images of the Clearwater and Kawartha sites: <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/services/operations/allies-partners/norad/aothr.html>

¹⁰ Impact Assessment Agency of Canada (IAAC), <https://iaac-aeic.gc.ca/050/evaluations/document/167717?culture=en-CA>

"As proposed, the project would involve the installation of a network of receiver antennas, security infrastructure, storage facilities, an access road, and parking areas."

An impact assessment study has been waived for the Clearwater site, because there are already constitutional and related legislated requirements through which "consultations with potentially impacted Indigenous groups and public engagement" to address possible adverse impacts of the project.

"The Polar Over The Horizon Radar (P-OTHR) initiative will provide long-range surveillance of Canadian territory and surrounding areas within the Arctic Circle by establishing a high-frequency (HF) Over The Horizon Radar (OTHR) system in the High Arctic." The objective is to "detect airborne and surface

maritime objects, at very long ranges, day and night to provide NORAD with a wide-area surveillance capability across the Arctic Circle.”

¹¹ Daniel Leblanc, “Ottawa signs preliminary deal with Swedish firm Saab for 6 GlobalEye aircraft,” CBC News, 25 Sept 2026.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/government-signs-preliminary-deal-saab-globaleye-9.7358021>

¹² The “**Defence Enhanced Surveillance from Space**” (DESSP) project. National Defense, <https://apps.forces.gc.ca/en/defence-capabilities-blueprint/project-details.asp?id=1912> It is to “replace [in 3035 or later] and improve upon” the current RADARSAT constellation of three satellites and related space assets.

¹³ Canadian Arctic Suite of Sensors, Dec 1/25, <https://apps.forces.gc.ca/en/defence-capabilities-blueprint/project-details.asp?id=2522>

¹⁴ National Defence, “Uncrewed Underwater Surveillance System” Dec 01/25.

<https://apps.forces.gc.ca/en/defence-capabilities-blueprint/project-details.asp?id=2523>

¹⁵ One Canadian company working at the centre of that challenge is GeoSpectrum Technologies. Based in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, GeoSpectrum specializes in underwater acoustic transducers and sonar systems—technology designed to detect sound, generate signals, and operate effectively in some of the most complex underwater environments on Earth.

For more than three decades, the firm has built surveillance systems, sonar platforms, and acoustic software for submarines, surface combatants, and uncrewed vessels, alongside a complementary line of commercial products. “Our company develops instruments designed to detect underwater sounds, as well as systems that generate sound waves in aquatic environments,” says Paul Yeatman, President of GeoSpectrum Technologies.

The company’s systems are engineered to transmit and receive signals in difficult conditions—while remaining hard to detect themselves. That balance is central to modern Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), underwater communications, and increasingly, Arctic operations.

Jeremy Hull, “GeoSpectrum Technologies Develops Sonar Systems for a Noisier Ocean,” Canadian Defence Review, August 10, 2026. <https://canadiandefencereview.com/geospectrum-technologies-develops-sonar-systems-for-a-noisier-ocean/>

¹⁶ “Cellula’s Envoy AUV Pushes Past 2,000 km Submerged, Marking a Major Endurance Milestone for Hydrogen-Powered Robotics

During the mission, Envoy remained deployed for 385 hours and travelled 2,023 kilometres submerged on hydrogen fuel cell power.” *Vanguard Defence*, Jul 23, 2026.

¹⁷ [https://d.docs.live.net/5ec2bb5e22c21834/2018-25 Docs/Defence/Procurement/Ships/Critiques of Canada sub order.bibliography by Claude.250926.docx](https://d.docs.live.net/5ec2bb5e22c21834/2018-25%20Docs/Defence/Procurement/Ships/Critiques%20of%20Canada%20sub%20order.bibliography%20by%20Claude.250926.docx)

Will Xavier, “Canadian experts raise doubts about ‘Arctic proven’ future submarines,” Baird Maritime, 09 Sep 2026. <https://www.bairdmaritime.com/security/naval/naval-submersibles/canadian-experts-raise-doubts-about-arctic-proven-future-submarines>

¹⁸ National Defence, “NORAD Modernization project timelines,” November 22, 2024. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/allies-partners/norad/norad-modernization-project-timelines.html>

¹⁹ National Defence, “Joint Statement on Canada-Australia Partnership on Emerging Missile Defence Research,” Nov 22/24, <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/news/2024/11/joint-statement-on-canada-australia-partnership-on-emerging-missile-defence-research.html>

²⁰ Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) President Natan Obed, Testimony at the *Senate Standing Committee on National Security*, 17 November 2025. <https://sencanada.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/451/secd/06ev-57346.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/wp-content/uploads/2026-07-25-ICC-GA-Declaration-FINAL.pdf>

²² Mary Simon, “Toward An Arctic Zone Of Peace: An Inuit Perspective,” *Peace Research*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (November 1989), pp. 27-30, 71 (5 pages), Published By: Canadian Mennonite University. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23609829>

²³ Ashley Barnes and Christopher Waters, “The Arctic Environment and International Humanitarian Law,” *Canadian Yearbook of International Law* 49 (2012), pp. 213–241.

“The authors explore how these various legal obligations [under IHL] could be applied in the Arctic context. Referring to the scientific literature, they suggest that, due to the particularly vulnerable nature of this regional environment, many traditional war-fighting techniques would lead to damage that is not legally permissible. [This summary published by Cambridge University Press in 2016. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/canadian-yearbook-of-international-law-annuaire-canadien-de-droit-international/article/abs/arctic-environment-and-international-humanitarianlaw/874C502AA4F1C86AA10B0B9A98182D3C>]

²⁴ Thomas Nilsen, “Belousov: ‘Appropriate to begin immediate preparations for full-scale nuclear tests at Novaya Zemlya’,” *The Barents Observer*, 5 November 2025. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/belousov-appropriate-to-begin-immediate-preparations-for-fullscale-nuclear-tests-at-novaya-zemlya/440170>

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²⁷ Thomas Nilsen, “British, Swedish and American reconnaissance aircraft monitor Kola Peninsula on Tuesday,” *The Barents Observer*, 08 Sept 26