



ARCTIC SECURITY BRIEFING PAPERS

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NATO's Brussels Summit and the Arctic

The run-up to this month's NATO summit featured an array of pundits, experts and, notably, Canadian Parliamentarians, encouraging the Alliance to step up its presence and collective operations in the Arctic. As it turned out, NATO leaders wisely resisted the entreaties. The Brussels Summit Declaration is silent on the Arctic, and NATO officials, when asked about it, were just as inclined to talk about Arctic cooperation as they were about military expansion and Russian or Chinese threats in the high north.

The two-pronged appeals ahead of the Brussels meeting – to heed the ongoing build-up of Russian military capacity in the Arctic, and to call for a more overt collective response by NATO – were typified by the *Wall Street Journal's* insistence that the US and NATO should “adopt a new strategy” in response to the “massive Russian military buildup” in the High North.¹ Just days before the summit, the UK's Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, called on NATO to develop a “coherent vision for how to protect NATO interests in the Arctic.”² Earlier, a *RealClear Defense* analysis, one among many similar media commentaries, also insisted that the US and NATO needed an Arctic strategy to counter Russia's decade-long campaign “to assert and even expand its claims to the Arctic.”³ A CBC analysis went further to warn that “Russian advances in the Arctic are leaving NATO behind,” and that “the Russian bear has pursued a steady march forward much closer to Canada in the Arctic.”⁴

A June 2018 report from the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN),⁵ adopts a similar posture to recommend that “the Government of Canada take a leading role within NATO to specialize in Arctic defence and security doctrine and capabilities, and enhance NATO's situational awareness in the Arctic, including joint training and military exercises for NATO members in the Canadian Arctic” (Recommendation 19).

It was a surprising appeal from Canadian Parliamentarians inasmuch as Canada's traditional posture has been one of firm opposition to collective NATO involvement in the Arctic.⁶ The Government of Stephen Harper was pointed in its insistence that NATO had no role in the Arctic, and also in its warnings that continued calls for a NATO role would only heighten east-west tensions.⁷ A 2017 statement by the Government of Justin Trudeau on Arctic foreign policy also implicitly rejects NATO involvement:

“The increasing accessibility of the Arctic has led to a widespread perception that the region could become a source of conflict. This has led to heightened interest in the Arctic in a number of international organizations including NATO and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. *Canada does not anticipate any military challenges in the Arctic and believes that the region is well managed through existing institutions*, particularly the Arctic Council. We will continue to monitor discussion of Arctic issues in other international forums and intervene when necessary to protect Canada's interests”⁸ (emphasis added).

Washington has certainly not proposed any significant role for NATO in the Arctic, seeing NORAD and its own Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) as the focus of defence efforts in the western Arctic. As the Canadian academic and Arctic specialist Michael Byers told the Committee:

“[I]t’s important to underline that there are in fact, from a security organizational perspective, two Arctics. There is the European Arctic, which the Americans regard as part of the U.S. European Command, which is very much a NATO co-operative exercise. There is the North American Arctic, which from an American perspective is NORTHCOM, and from a Canadian perspective a NORAD mission, not a NATO mission.” (p. 78).

The NDDN report nevertheless points to the Trudeau Government’s defence policy paper – *Strong, Secure, Engaged* – and its reference to enhancing military operational capabilities in the North, including the capacity to conduct “joint exercises with Arctic allies and partners” and strengthening “situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO” (p. 77), finding in that a basis for promoting a collective NATO presence in the Arctic. The report notes that “a number of witnesses welcomed the involvement of NATO in the security and defence of Canada’s Arctic,” and that, as the region becomes more accessible, and as “Russia builds its military capabilities and China increases its presence in the Arctic,” Canada should look to NATO for help in Arctic protection (p. 77). One witness, in a curious take on Alliance solidarity, even “urged Canada to convince NATO to spend more time worrying about Canada’s north as opposed to Norway’s north” (p. 77). Testimony at the Committee included calls for Canada to conduct training exercises with NATO in the Arctic, establish a NATO centre of excellence on Arctic Security in Canada, and play a leadership role in any NATO northern or Arctic command (p. 78).

On the other hand, there was also testimony urging cooperation as the priority, noting that close cooperation with Russia – on matters such as search and rescue, oil spill mitigation, Coast Guard operations – is already mandated and to some extent operationalized (p. 78). Notable in this regard was the testimony of Prof. James Fergusson of the University of Manitoba, among other things a foremost expert on NORAD and a consistent advocate for expanded Canadian defence capacity:

“When we look at Russia and Canada, as well as the United States, with regard to the Arctic west of Greenland, it is an area for cooperation among the three, and other members of the Arctic Council. Entering NATO here through whatever specific means is likely going to be perceived as provocative to the Russians, and is not going to be helpful to our interests...”⁹

Maj.-Gen. William Seymour, Chief of Staff Operations of Canada’s Joint Operations Command, told the Committee that Canada’s focus is on cooperation. “Through the Arctic Council and the work that we do in the Arctic Council to have a dialogue about the Arctic, we see it as a place where we need to come together and recognize that multiple nations will be up there, with the increasing openness because of global warming.” He pointed out that Russia is “very much an Arctic nation,” and given that a considerable proportion of Russians live in the Arctic, and given its major economic stake in the region and infrastructure requirements for the emerging Northern Sea route, a significant defence presence is not surprising.¹⁰

The Arctic Security Roundtable of the Munich Security Conference, at a 2017 meeting at Reykjavik’s historic Höfði House,¹¹ similarly acknowledged that Arctic problems are currently being addressed through dialogue and cooperation. As one participant put it, “we really have a shot to get the Arctic right.” While some participants saw Russia’s Arctic military build-up as a strategic expression of Russia’s antagonistic relationship with the West, others found it normal that military activity in the region would increase along with increased shipping and economic activity in order to deal with search and rescue and the protection of navigation. All looked to Russia for greater transparency and sensitivity towards its smaller neighbours and some suggested joint military exercises.¹²

At the Munich Security Conference itself, an annual gathering not given to sentimentality about international cooperation, the 2017 discussions noted a history of adherence and commitment to international law in the Arctic. And given that some 95 percent of the region's estimated resources are located in undisputed jurisdictions, "predictions of a hostile race for oil and gas in the High North," seemed to be "unwarranted."¹³ The conference acknowledged the potential for conflict – for example, Russia's assertion of national legal authority over all the waters of the Northern Sea Route is challenged by states that regard these as international waters – but the prominent point was that it is in the interests of all states that the Arctic remain "a zone of peace, prosperity, and constructive international cooperation."¹⁴

In the end, and notably so, leaders at the Brussels NATO Summit decided not to include any reference to the Arctic in their final Declaration. Nor was the issue raised or addressed in the Alliance Secretary-General's post-meeting press conference. Nor, by the way, does the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, the most recent and thus currently operative strategic guidance document of the Alliance, include any reference to the Arctic.

When the NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, is asked about NATO's role in the Arctic, he generally tries to find a balance between listing and emphasizing all the ways in which NATO is beefing up its military capacity/response to Russia, while also emphasizing the importance of dialogue and keeping tensions down in the Arctic and beyond. In a June press conference, when asked about the Arctic, he lauded the Arctic Council as a "platform for bringing people together" to address shared concerns and interests. He stressed working together with Russia on things like search and rescue – "that's cooperation which benefits both Russia, Norway and other NATO Allies," he said.¹⁵

The urge to insert NATO more overtly into the Arctic is obviously driven by a threat analysis that sees the Arctic as "returning to the forefront of the global security agenda" as "a potential geopolitical hotspot" (p. 29). But the prevailing view is more nuanced. Defence preparedness, much of it related to aiding civil authorities with lead responsibility for things like maritime law enforcement and regulatory compliance, and improved maritime situation awareness are on the agendas of all Arctic Ocean states. The Brussels Declaration raised the domain awareness issue, not in the context of the Arctic, but with regard to the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic (as well as the Black Sea and the Mediterranean). The Russia Navy has become more active and a more frequent presence in the North Atlantic GIUK gap (the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom gap, also stretching northward to Norway and the Arctic), raising questions for military strategists about the reliability of the sea-lanes of communication between North America and Europe (p. 32) in times of crisis, and prompting NATO states to increase and coordinate anti-submarine patrols in the North Atlantic.

But the Secretary-General also points out that in the Arctic itself, it is not a NATO international force that would be mobilized to improve, for example, the domain awareness of NATO members in their own neighborhoods. It is the individual Arctic States, four of which are NATO members, that monitor their respective jurisdictions and decide when and what additional capabilities may be needed. In other words, while pundits call for action by NATO in the Arctic, when officials talk about NATO presence or action there, the focus is not on a collective NATO command or an international forces presence, but rather on the presence and capabilities of states in the Arctic that are NATO members operating within their own national jurisdictions – in other words, the *status quo*.

NATO was invented, as its first Secretary-General famously put it, to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down, but there is obviously no keeping the Russians out of the Arctic. Not only is Russia decidedly in, it is destined to remain the dominant presence in the region. Based on the expanse of its Arctic territory and shoreline, the prominence of its northern economy, the relatively significant proportion of its population that lives there, the emerging maritime shipping route along its northern coast, and its genuinely extraordinary Arctic military capabilities, Russia has no serious Arctic rivals.

There are, in fact, no prospects for NATO states expanding their military commitments to the point of creating a military balance within the Arctic. The US and NATO could obviously mount overwhelming military challenges and deterrent forces outside the region to impact Russian military behavior within the region, but they won't come close, and won't try, to matching Russian military capability within the region itself. Calls for the US and Canada to acquire more icebreakers, for example, make sense from the point of view of helping both countries to more effectively meet their own needs, but with the current icebreaker count being 40-plus for Russia, one for the US, and six for Canada, there will be no counterbalancing Russian strength.

Arctic peace and stability will be best assured by regional cooperation that is based on international law and is bent on advancing the welfare of Arctic populations and enterprise, not by military expansion in pursuit of a regional military draw or by collective NATO military operations.

Notes

¹ Paula J. Dobriansky, "A Cold War in the Arctic Circle: NATO plans a new command to counter Russia's buildup. It should be only a start." Wall Street Journal, 12 January 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-cold-war-in-the-arctic-circle-1514823379>

² Mathieu Boulègue, "NATO Needs a Strategy for Countering Russia in the Arctic and the Black Sea," The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 02 July 2018. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/nato-needs-strategy-countering-russia-arctic-and-black-sea>

³ Daniel Gouré, "U.S. & NATO Need an Arctic Strategy to Counter Russia," *RealClear Defense*, 08 November 2017. https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/11/08/us_nato_need_an_arctic_strategy_to_counter_russia_112602.html

⁴ Alex Brocman, "How Russian advances in the Arctic are leaving NATO behind," CBC News, 08 January 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca>

⁵ "Canada and NATO: An Alliance Forged in Strength and Reliability," Report of the Standing Committee on National Defence, Chair Stephen Fuhr, June 2018, 42nd Parliament, 1st Session. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/report-10>

⁶ Helga Haftendorn, "NATO and the Arctic: is the Atlantic alliance a cold ar relic in a peaceful region now faced with non-military challenges?" *European Security*, Vol 20, No 3, September 2011, 337-361.

⁷ Jorge Barrera, "While Harper talked tough with NATO on Arctic, US believed PM all bark no bite," APTN National News, 11 May 2011. <https://aptnnews.ca>

⁸ Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy: Exercising : Sovereignty and Promoting Canada's Northern Strategy Abroad, Global Affairs Canada, 2017. http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/arctic-arctique/arctic_policy-canada-politique_arctique.aspx?lang=eng

⁹ James Fergusson, Testimony at the Standing Committee on National Defence, 08 February 2018.

¹⁰ Maj-Gen William Seymour, Testimony, Standing Committee on National Defence Number, 01 March 2018. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/meeting-85/evidence>

¹¹ Where Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev, to the consternation of their staff and advisors, broached the subject of complete nuclear disarmament.

¹² A "Posterchild" for Cooperation? Report from The MSC Arctic Security Roundtable Reykjavík. <https://www.securityconference.de/de/news/article/a-posterchild-for-cooperation-report-from-the-msc-arctic-security-roundtable-reykjavik/>

¹³ "The Arctic: Tempers Rising?" Munich Security Report 2017. <https://www.securityconference.de/debatte/munich-security-report/munich-security-report-2017/places/the-arctic-tempers-rising/>

¹⁴ "The Arctic: Tempers Rising?" Munich Security Report 2017. <https://www.securityconference.de/debatte/munich-security-report/munich-security-report-2017/places/the-arctic-tempers-rising/>

¹⁵ Jens Stoltenberg, Speech at Lancaster House, 21 June 2018. <https://www.nato.int>