

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES



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Why Fear Russia in the Arctic?

Contemplating Scenarios as an Exercise in Assumption-Testing and “Red Teaming”

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In an increasingly complex and uncertain global environment that features renewed strategic competition, it is important to continuously test assumptions and contemplate “known unknowns” and “unknown unknowns.” Most of my publications emphasize opportunities for circumpolar cooperation and downplay the probability of conventional armed conflict in the Arctic. I have highlighted points of convergence between Canadian and Russian Arctic interests, suggesting a decade ago that our countries’ respective Arctic regional strategies often appeared as “mirror images.”¹ Messaging from both countries, however, combines elements of strategic deterrence and the idea that the region should retain its status as a “territory of dialogue” and cooperation – or, at the very least, non-conflict.

Although Canada and Russia continue to share many interests in the Circumpolar Arctic, geopolitics and the global security environment suggest that they are likely to remain, at best, “frenemies” in the region² for the foreseeable future. Does Russian international behaviour over the last six years (highlighted by its illegal annexation of Crimea and aggression in Eastern Ukraine) portend similar revisionist designs for the Arctic, or do Russian national interests dictate that it preserve the regional status quo because the costs of deviating from it are too severe? Russian media discourse spans a range of opinion, from hard “conflict” frames that emphasize NATO aggression to those promoting “Arctic exceptionalism” with the region as a “zone of peace.”³ Similarly, official Russian messaging associated with increased investments in Arctic military capabilities signifies both competition with NATO adversaries and dual-use applications to address “soft security” needs.⁴ Carefully distinguishing between grand strategic threats, which often have an Arctic nexus but are best assessed and met through a broader international lens, and Arctic regional risks or threats emanating from regional dynamics or conditions themselves, helps to parse strategic capabilities that may be based in or pass through the Arctic from those intended to meet non-traditional security challenges and threats in the region.

For military and security analysts, the assessment of *threat* factors in both capability and intent. Defence analysts would suggest that they must be prepared to defend against the former as the latter may be misread or can change. While open source literature may not offer a complete picture of capabilities (and classified intelligence feeds would provide further indicators of intentions), independent academic analysis based on unclassified information can help to contemplate and identify possible risks and threats without adhering to cultural biases and assumptions associated with particular government institutions.

In this spirit, this *Strategic Perspective* is intended as a series of modest reflections prompted by discussions and debates with colleagues during conferences and workshops over the past two years. These conversations have encouraged me to continuously reconsider my ideas and assessments about how and why Russia's interests, actions, and intentions might represent risks or threats to Canada now and in the future. I offer these neither as *probable* threats nor "actionable" recommendations. Instead, they are merely offered as part of ongoing exercises to encourage a more fulsome range of thinking on this subject—exercises that I am sure Russian thinkers are undertaking with respect to Canada and its NATO allies.

When "red teaming" future scenarios (challenging assumptions by playing the role of a thinking adversary), the following are topics or themes that defence and security analysts might consider:

- Russia has invested heavily in refurbishing or opening new military facilities, airfields, search and rescue, supply and maintenance, and scientific infrastructure in its Arctic. While I have argued that this represents a convenient way for Putin to funnel state funds to support oligarchs in the resource sector who are embarking on economically marginal or unprofitable projects, this infrastructure lays a foundation for Russian military force projection in the circumpolar North. Infrastructure (capability) built for "defensive" purposes (intent) can be converted to "offensive" purposes if intentions change, or their defensive use can limit the Western Allies' freedom of action in the Eurasian Arctic and Bering Strait region (anti-access, area denial: A2/AD). Accordingly, it is important for Western analysts to carefully monitor Russian infrastructure developments, focusing on material capabilities being developed and their prospective uses beyond those articulated in official statements – particularly those comforting statements intended for a foreign audience that promote the Arctic as a "zone of peace" and "territory of dialogue." There are multiple strands of Russian political and media discourse that emphasize either "hard power" or soft security discourses⁵ (as is the case in North American assessments), and analysts must pay heed to both.
- Hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns have become central pillars of Russia's evolving approach to waging twenty-first century conflict. While conventional Russian military action against other Arctic states remains highly unlikely given the probability that such aggression would escalate into a general war that Russia could not win, Russia could seek to exploit divisions within Canada through concerted disinformation campaigns designed to exacerbate tensions between Canadians. For example, Russian "vilify and amplify" techniques could be used to sow general political discord in the Canadian North, or to encourage foreign investment in Russian rather than Canadian resource development or transportation projects. While the relative returns on this sort of disinformation campaign directed at the Canadian North would be minimal

compared to a similar campaign waged in Canada more generally, it cannot be dismissed if Russia's Arctic strategy evolves in a more aggressive direction.

- “Patriotic journalism” emanating from Russia that trumpets Russia's Arctic military prowess, if accepted uncritically, could lead Canada and its allies to excessively invest scarce resources (financial and personnel) in Arctic defences that could otherwise be deployed elsewhere internationally to advance national interests and project Canadian/Western values. Dedicating resources to Arctic defence that are not proportionate to the “actual” military threat also might open opportunities for Russian activity in other regions, thus undermining global peace and security more generally. NORAD Commander General Terrence O'Shaughnessy's insistence that “the homeland is not a sanctuary” in the face of advanced weapons and highly-capable delivery platforms⁶ does not apply equally across all domains, and geography remains a significant variable in constraining or inhibiting certain types of Arctic operations.⁷ Overamplifying Arctic (regional) threats could deflect attention away from more strategically significant centres of gravity elsewhere in the world, thus playing into the hands of would-be adversaries by reducing the ability of Canada and its allies to project military force from our homeland into other theatres.
- Differing threat assessments between Canada and its NATO allies predicated on divergent perceptions of Russia's Arctic intentions could lead to political divisions and/or the erosion of trust between NATO members, thus splitting the alliance. For more than a decade, Canada's reticence to have NATO adopt an explicit Arctic role – for fear that this would unnecessarily antagonize the Russians and/or involve non-Arctic states with little competence in Arctic issues – differed from countries like Norway.⁸ Although Canada's official position has changed and it now commits openly to “support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO,”⁹ it does not necessarily share policy positions with some NATO members who are actively “campaigning for freedom of navigation” in the Northwest Passage (Germany)¹⁰ or who suggest that the Arctic is a “second Middle East” (France).¹¹ Exacerbating such divisions would, of course, be of strategic value to Russia. One way to avoid this divergence is by carefully discerning between “Arctic threats” that cover the entire circumpolar region; threats specific to the North American Arctic; threats specific to the Nordic countries; and those that relate to Russia's access to the North Atlantic through Arctic waters. Canada and its allies should be vigilant in preventing Arctic issues from becoming a wedge between NATO members, which could make us pawns in Russia's game to fragment the alliance.
- There is a danger that Canadian and allied messaging that overly celebrates “Arctic cooperation” amongst all of the Arctic states (including Russia) can become a way for Russia to sell to domestic and international audiences that the West/NATO has accepted the current situation in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine as a new *status quo*. Although many commentators are quick to highlight that many forms of Arctic regional cooperation have persisted since 2014 (albeit not in the military sphere), Canadian messaging about Arctic cooperation with Russia must be careful not to discredit NATO forces pledging assistance to allies or to undermine Western sanctions against Russia for its aggression elsewhere. Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, released in September 2019, committed to “restart a regular bilateral dialogue on Arctic issues with Russia in key areas related to Indigenous issues, scientific cooperation, environmental

protection, shipping and search and rescue” that could facilitate the sharing of best practices, ensure that Arctic coastal state sovereignty and sovereign rights are respected internationally, and build trust outside of the military sphere.¹² As long as strategic communications clearly and deliberately differentiate between high and low level political issues, dual-track messaging that promotes Arctic regional cooperation without undermining strategic deterrence or alliance solidarity, and does not overlook violations of international law in other areas, can be appropriate and helpful to promote Canada’s interests.

- Russia’s tightened state control over the domestic information space can facilitate misrepresentation of Western Arctic policies/strategies and foment anti-NATO rhetoric amongst the Russian population on false pretences owing to the central place of the Arctic in Russian national mythology and identity. (Examples of fear-mongering Russian newspapers identifying the 5000-strong Canadian Rangers as a military threat to Russia are an absurd example of how any Arctic military investments can be distorted to fit a narrative of Western militarization of the region and threats to Russia!) Careful messaging about Canada’s military capabilities (both actual and planned) and intentions is essential to avoid playing into alarmist Russian narratives about Arctic militarization. Canada’s 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, prudently situates Russia as *both* a state “willing to test the international security environment” that has reintroduced “a degree of major power competition” *and* one of the Arctic states that has “long cooperated on economic, environmental, and safety issues” and has “an enduring interest in continuing this productive collaboration” given its vested interests in the region.¹³ This distinction can and should be maintained, allowing dialogue on soft security issues (such as search and rescue, mass rescue operations, and joint fisheries enforcement) while also ensuring that Canada is prepared (in concert with its U.S. ally) to detect, defeat, and deter military threats to North American defence and security.
- Russian aggression in Ukraine was predicated on different drivers, strategic rationales, and demographic considerations than exist in Arctic states neighbouring Russia. Despite casual commentaries drawing analogies between that conflict and potential Arctic futures, I have yet to read any credible scenario where a comparable situation would or could unfold in the Arctic – particularly in the North American Arctic. Russia’s longstanding interests in Svalbard, however, represent a potential source of conflict in the European Arctic, with the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* indicating in 2016 (based upon conversations with sources in the Russian Ministry of Defense) that Norway’s efforts to establish “absolute national jurisdiction over the Spitsbergen [Svalbard] archipelago and the adjacent 200 nautical miles maritime boundary around” could precipitate military clashes.¹⁴ Canada/NATO might consider engaging with Norway to more systematically assess potential threats to Svalbard and discuss how NATO can deter Russia from militarily challenging Norwegian sovereignty over the archipelago.

Notes

¹ P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Mirror Images? Canada, Russia, and the Circumpolar World," *International Journal* 65/4 (2010): 879-97.

² Elana Wilson Rowe, "Analyzing Frenemies: An Arctic Repertoire of Cooperation and Rivalry," *Political Geography* 76 (2020), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629818305158>.

³ See, for example, Ekaterina Klimenko, Annika Hilsson, and Miyase Christensen, *Narratives in the Russian Media of Conflict and Cooperation in the Arctic* (Stockholm: SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security 2019/5, August 2019); and Evgeniia Sidorova, "Content Analysis of the Russian Press Before and After the Ukraine Crisis," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 25/3 (2019): 269-287.

⁴ Valery Konyshov and Alexander Sergunin, "The Changing Role of Military Power in the Arctic," in *The Global Arctic Handbook*, eds. M. Finger and L. Heininen (Cham: Springer, 2019), 171-95

⁵ On Russian discourses, see Elana Wilson Rowe, "A Dangerous Space? Unpacking State and Media Discourses on the Arctic," *Polar Geography* 36/3 (2013): 232-44; Alexander Sergunin and Valery Konyshov, *Russia in the Arctic: Hard or Soft Power?* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2015); Daria Gritsenko, "Vodka on ice? Unveiling Russian Media Perceptions of the Arctic," *Energy Research & Social Science* 16 (2016): 8-12; and Gritsenko and Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, "Telling Domestic and International Policy Stories: The Case of Russian Arctic policy," in *Russia's Far North: The Contested Energy Frontier*, eds. Tynkkynen, Tabata Shinichiro, Gritsenko, and Masanori Goto (New York: Routledge, 2018), 191-205.

⁶ Statement of General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, United States Air Force Commander United States Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), 13 February 2020, 4. See also Gen. O'Shaughnessy's statement before the SASC Strategic Forces Subcommittee, 3 April 2019.

⁷ See, for example, Ryan Dean and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Geostrategy and Canadian Defence: From C.P. Stacey to Twenty-First Century Arctic Threat Assessment," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 20/1 (2019): 1-64; and Kim Nossal, "The Imperatives of Canada's Strategic Geography," in *Canadian Defence Policy in Theory and Practice*, 11-28.

⁸ See, for example, Andreas Østhagen, Gregory Levi Sharp, and Paal Sigurd Hilde, "At Opposite Poles: Canada's and Norway's approaches to security in the Arctic," *Polar Journal* 8/1 (2018): 163-181.

⁹ Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (2017), 113, <http://dgpapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines: Assume responsibility, seize opportunities* (Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, 2013), 1.

¹¹ France, Ministère des Armées, *France and the New Strategic Challenges in the Arctic* (2019), 3, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/565142/9742558/file/France%20and%20the%20New%20Strategic%20Challenges%20in%20the%20Arctic%20-%20DGRIS_2019.pdf.

¹² Canada, Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (2019), <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1560523306861/1560523330587>.

¹³ Department of National Defence (DND), *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (2017), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2018/strong-secure-engaged/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.

¹⁴ Quoted in Thomas Nilsen, "Kommersant: Russia lists Norway's Svalbard policy as potential risk of war," *Barents Observer*, 4 October 2017, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2017/10/kommersant-russia-lists-norways-svalbard-policy-potential-risk-war>.