

The Arctic, a Geographical Region Beset by Geopolitical Tensions with Russia

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Geopolitical tensions linked to the Arctic have developed as a result of Russia's hostile attitude in the region. The war in Ukraine has played an important role in accentuating this crisis. For several years, [Russia has intensified the militarization of its Arctic territory](#), raising concerns about its intentions in the Far North. This has led to an escalation of tensions with other countries in the region, such as Canada, the United States, and several European countries, who are concerned about this military build-up. However, these diplomatic tensions over the Arctic are nothing new. The region has already been the scene of similar confrontations.

In particular, [the political and military tensions of the Cold War seem to be repeating themselves in our own time](#). What distinguishes today's situation from that of the Cold War is the interests at stake: today, they are primarily strategic, economic, and military, rather than ideological. The Arctic is an economically important region for Russia, the USA and Canada, as well as for several European countries such as Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The Canadian Arctic Archipelago, which accounts for 40% of the country's territory, is a major strategic area for the country. It borders Russia, which claims part of the Arctic Sea as part of its internal waters, justifying this position by its attachment to the Siberian Islands. This region of the world has been the scene of diplomatic tensions for many years, compounded by global warming, which is [a key factor in the area's environmental and political degradation](#).

These recent tensions between Arctic countries have led Canada to recognize the need to modernize its capabilities in the region, in response to the political and military stakes exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine. It is crucial to understand why Canada is reviewing its Arctic policy strategy, and to examine what is at stake.

The aim of this policy brief is to demonstrate that the Arctic region is undergoing a major geopolitical shift, threatening the area's political stability. Added to this vision is the idea of a hybrid war, combining military and non-military means. Misinformation and foreign interference seem to be the new weapons of this hybrid war, propagated by Russia, they can have a significant impact on the stability of the Arctic region. For this reason, Canada must adopt a defense policy that is adapted to a Russia that is militarizing and not hesitating to [use non-military means](#) to impose its influence around the world.

The Arctic: a geographical zone beset by diplomatic tensions

Geopolitical tensions and the Arctic's vulnerability to global warming make it a difficult region to control. Far from being spared political disagreements between the major powers, the region has seen diplomatic tensions intensify since the start of the war in Ukraine. This has had an impact on the functioning of the Arctic Council, which has been considerably [slowed down by its members](#), who see Russian action in Ukraine as [a violation of international law](#) and a threat to the global stability the Council strives to maintain.

Global warming is both a threat and an opportunity for the major powers. This paradox now opens up access to areas of exploitation previously inaccessible due to ice. The region, rich in natural resources such as [coal, iron, gold, and uranium](#), as well as oil and natural gas deposits, is therefore subject to an increase in industrial installations. It is estimated that around 30% of the world's oil reserves are located in the Arctic, a fact that is attracting the interest of the major powers. Some countries consider that [environmental protection](#) is essential and that the region must be protected from human action, while others see it as an opportunity for economic and military development. Such is the case of Russia, which is [stepping up its military presence](#), justifying this stance by its desire to develop its Arctic territory, while defending the integrity of its borders against the effects of global warming and foreign interference.

This scramble for the region's resources has created [a climate comparable to that of the Cold War](#), characterized by diplomatic tensions, claims to the ocean floor and the allocation of undersea resources. This climate of tension evokes the event of 2007, when Russia [planted a flag on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean](#), claiming sovereignty over the seabed. An image perceived as a political maneuver on Moscow's part.

Russia's rise to power in the Arctic

The war in Ukraine has profoundly altered the global geostrategic order, plunging the world into an uncertain future, while redefining the diplomatic chessboard in the Arctic region. In particular, the adoption of sanctions against Russia by the member countries of the Arctic Council. In response to these new dynamics, Arctic countries are seeking to strengthen their military budgets in order to ensure their regional security and adapt to increased geopolitical stakes. This is what [Norway and Denmark report](#). They explain, however, that an armed conflict is unlikely, but that a hybrid war is conceivable given Russia's attitude in the region. The international context unfolding before our eyes is leading [the major powers into a competition in which the Arctic will be at the heart of discussions](#). Canadian and American intelligence reports point to [new military bases and assets](#) in the Russian-controlled zone.

This militarization is nothing new, however, as Moscow has already indicated [its desire to increase its presence](#) in this part of the world. The country seems to be carrying out numerous military exercises in the region, such as [firing ballistic missiles](#) into the Barents Sea. A warning sent out by Moscow to demonstrate its superiority and reaffirm its desire to monitor this part of the world. Added to this is a feeling of encirclement following the accession of several Arctic countries to NATO. Russia's changing attitude is prompting Canada to reassess its military-strategic stakes in the region, in order to ensure the protection and defense of its Arctic archipelago.

The era of war in Ukraine has opened a new door to the [use of disinformation to influence foreign populations](#). Although disinformation campaigns, integrated into [the concept of hybrid warfare](#), have

become a crucial factor in national defense and population protection, it is important to qualify them. These campaigns are used to provoke debate within national politics, exacerbate social cleavages or sow mistrust in a government. They can also disrupt a country's democratic process. The aim is to disseminate totally or partially erroneous information, via uncontrolled channels or social networks, targeting specific criteria that will have a moderate impact on national security or public opinion. Used for propaganda purposes, it can be [a relatively effective weapon](#). Russia seems to be adept at these methods, which cannot be associated with any one country, as they are difficult to detect and attribute, risking diplomatic tensions. However, several reports document [the use of disinformation](#) during Russia's annexation of Crimea. As far as the Arctic is concerned, Russian disinformation could harm Canadian interests, by creating discord in public opinion or influencing markets beneficial to the Russians. This approach is mentioned in [Whitney Lackenbauer's policy brief](#).

Although the Canadian government has put in place measures to limit the impact of disinformation, the challenge remains immense. In a digital world such as ours, it is extremely difficult to control the false information that is disseminated around the world. The [rapid response actions](#) established by the Canadian government are not enough to limit the impact of misinformation on communities.

Military development, a necessary issue for the Canadian government

Canada recently recognized the importance of remilitarizing forces in the region to prepare for any eventuality. It also spoke of its desire to [improve NORAD](#), so as to be able to meet future challenges posed by the evolution of aviation, while protecting borders and ensuring national security. In 2015, the government launched the GBDA (ground-based air defense system) project. But this project is not sufficient in the face of new military technologies from certain countries. The Canadian armed forces are dependent on the Americans, with NORAD, which is commanded by the United States, ensuring permanent airspace security. But that's not enough: we need a territory-based system that's oriented towards the Arctic.

This vision is also shared by the [US Department of Defence](#) in its new Arctic Strategy, published on June 21, 2024. The High Arctic region looks set to become the new surveillance point for the United States and its allies. Canada, the U.S. and other Arctic nations are demonstrating a willingness to step up their military presence in the region, justifying this stance by the fact that the world is going through a delicate period in which global geopolitical tensions are omnipresent. However, Canada finds itself in a delicate situation. Its military capabilities are limited, in part due to a military funding policy which considers that the country, because of its geographical position, would not be vulnerable to direct attack. Today, [this perception](#) is being challenged as tensions in the High Arctic intensify. Lack of resources is a major obstacle, forcing the country to modernize its forces and develop [a deterrence presence](#) in the region.

Recommendations and considerations for Canada

Faced with rising geopolitical tensions in the Arctic, Canada must strengthen its capabilities to protect its interests and those of its allies. The country must take into account the fact that a new geostrategic order is likely to emerge, in which the Arctic will be the scene of military and diplomatic action. Anticipation is the lifeblood of defense, and anticipating a crisis doesn't mean that it's going to happen, but that when it does, the country will be in a position to deal with it. Canada's military lag is evident in all areas. It is imperative for the country to re-evaluate its defense policy, considering funding in line with NATO recommendations, up to [2% of GDP](#). At the same time, it needs to strengthen its missile

and aircraft interception capability, particularly in remote and high-risk regions. This includes modernizing NORAD in agreement with the United States, acquiring ground-air defense systems and setting up forward defense bases for enhanced protection in the event of high-intensity conflict. It also needs to reassess its capacity to protect its maritime borders and ensure a deterrent military presence in the Arctic.

The emergence of new methods of disinformation requires Canada to adopt a policy to combat them. The war in Ukraine has brought to light new methods of disinformation associated with artificial intelligence, and it would not be surprising to see Russia using them to destabilize the High Arctic. The rapid action program against disinformation set up by the government could be a good means of action, making it possible to contain false information that could circulate on networks or through Arctic communities.

Finally, Canada could strengthen its strategic positions by opening its bases to NATO countries for collective protection. This would make military forces rapidly available, while compensating for the lack of resources currently allocated by the government to the protection of Arctic territory. What's more, Canada has solid expertise in polar military operations and strategies adapted to the region's extreme conditions. This approach could be in line with the [common desire of Arctic countries](#) to strengthen their means of preventing any eventuality in this part of the world.