

Potential French-Canadian Collaboration in the Face of New Security and Climate Threats in the Canadian Arctic

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Summary

While allies in numerous international organizations, France and Canada also maintain bilateral relations in many fields, including defence. Focusing on the Arctic sub-regions, this note proposes possible avenues of collaboration between Canada, an Arctic state, and France, an observer country to the Arctic Council. The identification of possible avenues for collaboration between these two states is all the more interesting given that the Canadian Arctic is facing ever-greater security and climate threats, which could require support from its allies. The updated Canadian Defence Policy, released on April 8, 2024, by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Defence Minister Bill Blair, was in fact a response to the need to address new threats created by “the changing geopolitical environment and natural landscapes” for Canada and its population.

More specifically, this new policy identifies three trends within which avenues for collaboration between Canada and France could be developed.

- The security threats posed by certain external powers in the Canadian Arctic crystallize around the presence of China. Since 2022, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) has been warning of the risk of Chinese (and Russian) interests in the construction of commercial (mining, telecommunications) and civil (roads, houses, etc.) infrastructures in the North.
- The challenges linked to new technologies in Arctic sub-regions can be illustrated by the eminently strategic nature of submarine telecommunications cables. Recent cable cuts have illustrated the vulnerability of these telecommunications infrastructures and the need for digital sovereignty on the part of certain state actors.
- Still too often treated uniformly by the media, the impacts of climate change will be uneven across the North American, European and Russian Arctic sub-regions. The size, geology and natural environment of Inuit Nunangat make it one of the states most at risk, alongside Russia.

- France and Canada have already forged ties in strategic research. These could be strengthened on defence issues, both within universities and research institutes, by creating, for example, synergies between MINDS and DGRIS. A potential update of the French Polar Strategy could highlight the need to increase joint search and rescue training between the two countries. Finally, the sharing of information and scientific data on misinformation and on the multiple risks and impacts of permafrost climate change must continue to be stepped up between Canada, France, and their allies. Initial measures were announced during Emmanuel Macron's visit to Canada at the end of September 2023.

Introduction

“The world has changed drastically since *Strong, Secure, Engaged* was released in 2017. Canada is facing new and evolving security threats, including climate change and its impacts on our Arctic; threats from Russia, China, and others to the international rules that keep us all safe; and accelerating changes to the character of conflict.”

- Bill Blair, [April 8, 2024](#)

Canada and France have long been allies and share common values. Numerous exchanges and collaborations exist in various fields: the economy, culture, education, the French-speaking world... In the face of numerous geopolitical tensions, new conflicts, the return of war to Europe, and the increase in acts of interference, it is appropriate to strengthen defence cooperation to the benefit of bilateral interests. Bilateral defence dialogue has already been institutionalized in 2015 with the establishment of the Franco-Canadian Defence Cooperation Council. With regard to the Arctic region, France wishes to maintain a high level of scientific, environmental, economic, and strategic commitment. This was reaffirmed in its [national Arctic roadmap in 2016](#) and its [polar strategy in 2022](#). In this context, the Ministry of the Armed Forces is developing its knowledge of the activities of state and private players in the region and refining its vision of developments that could have an impact on French interests.

To this end, the Arctic Observatory, financed by the French Ministry of Defence's Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS) and managed by the Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS), monitors Arctic issues across the board, from national strategies to the production of standards, technological developments, and environmental aspects. In order to identify possible avenues for collaboration between France and Canada on these issues, we need to take stock of the defence challenges identified by Canada for its Arctic sub-regions. This is all the more important as Canada's defence policy has recently been revised, and bilateral collaboration between the two countries in this sector in the Arctic sub-regions is currently limited.

Indeed, on April 8, 2024, the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, and his Defence Minister, Bill Blair, issued a defence policy update in the face of the “new threats” created by the “evolving geopolitical environment and natural landscapes” for Canada and its population since 2017, when Canada's last Arctic Policy was published. While experts are more or less critical in their analysis of this update ([Légion](#); [Marquis](#); [Massoud](#); [Ouellette-Vézina](#)), this new policy points to three “powerful and interconnected trends (that) are reshaping our world”. Firstly, climate change and its destabilizing and disproportionate effects on the Arctic and Canada's North are making these subregions increasingly accessible and confronting them with new security challenges. Secondly, 'autocracies and disruptive states' are challenging the international order that ensures Canada's security and prosperity, including “blatant violations of international law by Russia” and China's attempts to reshape the international order. Finally, [new and disruptive technologies](#) are rapidly redefining conflicts and disrupting Canada's security.

Focusing on the Arctic sub-regions, this note will address these issues by grouping them under two banners. In the first part, we will look at the security threats posed by certain external powers on Canadian soil, and those linked to new technologies for Canada. Then, in the second part, we'll look at some of the threats, identified as the most significant, linked to the impacts of climate change in the Inuit Nunangat regions of the Canadian Arctic. Finally, recommendations and avenues for collaboration between France and Canada on the themes covered in this note will be proposed.

Part 1: Security Threats

“Today we are confronted with a complex, generational challenge. [...] Democracy, free trade, and the rules and values that underpin them are increasingly being contested by authoritarian states. In parallel, the character of conflict is changing as technology evolves rapidly. Ultimately, our closest values of democracy, freedom, peace, and fairness—which Canadians have fought and died to defend—are being challenged.”

- Bill Blair, [April 2024](#)

The security threats identified in the Canadian Arctic are of two kinds: the interference and presence of certain outside powers on Canadian soil, and the challenges posed by new technologies.

The security threats posed by certain outside powers in the Canadian Arctic are primarily illustrated by the presence of China. Indeed, according to Mr. Laporte, Executive Director of the Security and Defence Relations Division of Global Affairs Canada, Canada is [very attentive](#) to Chinese activities and to joint military activities between China and Russia, particularly maritime exercises. While, in his view, China's ambitions and economic breakthrough in the Arctic region reflect its growing commitments to global governance, there is nonetheless a [growing Canadian distrust of China](#). Accelerated since 2018 with the [Two Michaels Affair](#), this distrust has crystallized in the Canadian Arctic around several events in early 2023, revealing the risks of Chinese interference through dual infrastructures or domains.

In early 2023, four unidentified flying objects were spotted and shot down in North America. While only one of these balloons was formally identified as belonging to China, the Canadian Army soon afterwards detected Chinese surveillance buoys in its Arctic waters. Admittedly, this is not a new phenomenon, dating back to 2022 ([Eye On the Arctic](#); [The Globe and Mail](#); [Eye on the Arctic](#)), but the chain of events exacerbated the tensions already present in Sino-Canadian bilateral relations. In addition, they highlighted the challenges over domain awareness in the Arctic and the difficulty of responding to threats in the face of the distances and hostile conditions of Inuit Nunangat. They also highlighted the potential risks of using dual-use infrastructures and technologies. Indeed, although mobilized as part of a Chinese scientific research project, these buoys, “capable of mapping the seabed and measuring ice thickness”, were also “capable of monitoring underwater activity”. While military intent has not been proven in this case, it remains a [possibility](#). In addition to research and scientific cooperation, other civilian fields in which China is a stakeholder are of concern to Canada ([The Globe and Mail](#); [Journal de Québec](#); [Journal de Québec](#)). These include shipping and illegal fishing by Chinese vessels in Canada's territorial waters.

The lack of infrastructure in the North, whether essential (homes, hospitals, schools) or related to the economic sector (mining), also brings its own set of challenges. Firstly, it is already leading to an exodus to southern cities, as in the Northwest Territories. The Premier of the Northwest Territories, Caroline Cochrane, stated last July that “[Canada will not be able to exercise its sovereignty in the Northwest Territories if its communities are not properly equipped and built](#)”, and if these communities are emptied of their inhabitants. In the longer term, if this phenomenon becomes widespread and Inuit Nunangat becomes uninhabitable, Canada's very Arctic identity could be called into question.

Secondly, the Chinese state's interest in mining and infrastructure projects in Inuit Nunangat raises issues of national security. For example, the “[Gray Bays](#)” deep-water port, essential to Nunavut's economic development, is also suspected of fostering Chinese military and surveillance activities.

Since 2022, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) [has been warning](#) of the risk of Chinese (and Russian) interests in the construction of commercial (mines, telecommunications) and civil (roads, houses, etc.) infrastructures in the North. CSIS even went so far as to offer its services to Inuit representatives to help them make their case to the federal government, including drafting a budget proposal to increase federal spending on infrastructure. In addition, Natan Obed, president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), asked CSIS to share more information to help him be better prepared. CSIS, for its part, is reportedly increasing its presence in the North and consolidating its relations with Inuit communities to better secure the area and counter foreign interference and espionage. In fact, according to documents consulted by Radio Canada, CSIS [has identified](#) clandestine foreign investment, attempted interference at all levels of government and in research programs and funding, as well as theft of research or data. Most recently, Canada blocked for the first time a sale of rare earths to a company based in China. The federal government does not rule out intervening again to “[restrict Chinese investment in the Canadian mining sector](#)”, as Ottawa considers rare metals to be a matter of national security and a key element in its decarbonization strategy.

The challenges posed by new technologies in Arctic sub-regions can be illustrated by the [eminently strategic nature of submarine telecommunications cables](#). Indeed, recent cable cuts have illustrated the vulnerability of these telecommunications infrastructures and the need for digital sovereignty on the part of certain states, particularly the European Union. In the Baltic Sea, three submarine cables (one Finnish, one Swedish and one Russian) and a gas pipeline were damaged on the night of October 7-8, 2023 by the anchor of a Chinese container ship, the *New Polar Bear* ([Staalesen](#); [Kauranen and Van Overstraeten](#); [Sytas and Kauranen](#); [Kauranen and Johnson](#)). Although the deliberate nature of these cuts could not be formally demonstrated, the damage revealed the role of the Arctic as a central transit route for digital data.

Finally, the threat of traditional armed conflict in the Arctic remains highly hypothetical, given the environment and isolation of certain Arctic sub-regions. It should be noted, however, that the European Arctic, made up of several sovereign states, some of which border on the Russian Federation, would theoretically be more threatened in the event of armed conflict than the North American Arctic, made up of two allied states, the USA and Canada.

Part 2: Climate Threats

“We can no longer rely on Canada's geography — surrounded by three oceans — to protect us.”
- Mélanie Joly, [April 2024](#)

The impacts of climate change on the Arctic marine and terrestrial environment have been in the news for decades. However, they are often treated in a uniform manner, erasing the incredible diversity of the North American, European and Russian Arctic sub-regions.

With regard to climatic threats to the marine environment, the best-known example is the opening up of navigable sea lanes, a phenomenon whose real impacts are still under-reported ([Lasserre](#); see the 'Navigation' chapters of [L'Année Arctique](#); [Polar Navigation](#)). Indeed, it is often claimed that the disappearance of the summer ice pack will facilitate navigation in the Arctic Ocean. However, while the Russian coasts, further away from the pack ice, could theoretically be more “accessible”, this is not

the case for the Canadian archipelago, whose channels could be blocked by increasing growlers and other drift ice. Moreover, on both sides, [the fragmentation of the pack ice](#) complicates ice chart updates, increases humidity, fog, and the risk of storms - all phenomena that make navigation uncertain, slower and riskier. In Laporte's view, this opening up of sea lanes would be a double-edged sword, opening up new maritime opportunities on the one hand, but massively disrupting daily life and civil and military infrastructures on the other. For Canada, these openings would mean a necessary strengthening of surveillance capabilities in the region, particularly in the face of ecological risk, in sparsely populated areas with limited infrastructure.

At circumpolar level, this increase in shipping would also mean an increase in search and rescue resources, as coastal states have a legal international obligation to come to the aid of vessels in distress in their waters. Another much-discussed topic is the likelihood of natural resources being located at sea, which needs to be put into context. It is important to remember that the United States Geological Survey (USGS) study of potential offshore hydrocarbon reserves in the Arctic, published in 2008, is based on probabilities, not proven resources. However, in the absence of more recent studies on the same scale, it remains the benchmark. Furthermore, even if this estimate is confirmed, it should be noted that most of these resources are located on the seabed of the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of coastal states. As such, they would be the exclusive property of these states, minimizing the risk of conflicts or “resource races” (Arctic Observatory, Report 4, Note 2, non-public).

When it comes to climatic threats to the terrestrial environment, the Arctic states will not all be equal. The most significant threat is the accelerated thawing of permafrost - ground composed of rock, sediment and ice whose temperature remains at or below 0°C for at least two consecutive years. The Russian Federation, for example, is 65% permafrost, making it the state most threatened by this phenomenon. According to one study, 80% of infrastructure in the Russian Arctic is built on [permafrost](#). The North American Arctic (comprising Alaska, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut and Northern Labrador) comes second, followed by Greenland, the Scandinavian countries and Iceland.

In addition to threats to marine and terrestrial environments, climate change in the Arctic can also be illustrated by its impacts on Arctic populations, and more specifically indigenous peoples. Indeed, for Bridget Larocque, former policy advisor and researcher with the Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC) and Executive Director of Gwich'in Council International (GCI) (2007-2012), [climate threats impact first and foremost the rights and traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples](#), intrinsically linked to the central role of the Territory (called “*Nuna*” in Inuktitut) for their [well-being](#). In fact, climate change exacerbates all the threats to [human security](#). For example, in addition to altering the migration routes of animal species due to warmer ground, air and water temperatures, thawing permafrost is increasing the discharge of freshwater into deltas, pushing marine fish and their predators out to sea, further threatening the food security of circumpolar communities.

Ultimately, these combined threats are likely to exacerbate the above-mentioned phenomenon of southward migration and its impact on Canadian sovereignty in the North. The importance of these issues for Canada's North can be illustrated by the [words](#) of Stéphane Roussel, Professor at the École nationale d'administration publique. In his view, the Ministry of Defence is the only one with sufficient capacity to provide the necessary services to aboriginal populations, and should multiply human security approaches in its internal security policies - [a revival that would also be desirable for NATO](#). This position is [shared](#) by ENAP researcher Laurent Borzillo, who argues that greater investment in

Ranger patrols would help to anticipate these threats and ensure better protection for aboriginal communities ([Government of Canada](#); [Radio Canada](#); [Lackenbauer, Vullierme & Roussel](#)).

Finally, in its [Climate Change Security Impact Assessment Report](#), published on July 9, 2024, NATO summarizes the threats facing Allied Forces in the Arctic: “technological and logistical challenges” of Arctic theaters of operation (increasingly unpredictable harsh climate, wind speeds, strong tidal currents, long distances, darkness, remoteness, limited radar, satellite and military and critical infrastructure coverage) ; coastal erosion, permafrost degradation and flooding, risking damage to military infrastructure; flooding, snow or storms blocking supply routes; increased precipitation weakening the load-bearing capacity of soils and roads; fighting boreal forest fires; “environmental and human security”.

In the face of these security and climatic threats, how can France and Canada work together?

Part 3: Recommendations for French-Canadian Collaboration

Before going any further, we would like to emphasize that these recommendations are to be taken for what they are, i.e., our modest contribution to a “common bilateral strategic thinking” that could lead to a better understanding of the respective perceptions of these two States concerning these sub-regions.

France and Canada have already forged **ties in the field of strategic research, which could be strengthened** on defence issues, both within universities and research institutes. Both countries have similar funding programs. In Canada, the Department of National Defence funds the Mobilizing New Ideas in Defence and Security (MINDS) program. In France, the Direction générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie (DGRIS) of the French Ministry of the Armed Forces funds the ministry's strategic research support system (outsourced studies, grants, Pacte enseignement supérieur). The DGRIS also oversees the Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire (IRSEM), the strategic research arm of the Ministry of the Armed Forces. We recommend strengthening collaboration between institutional, public and private players.

Following the example of the study day organized by the France-Canada “personnalités d'avenir” program on “The Arctic and transatlantic cooperation”, we recommend organizing a larger-scale annual event with the support of both States. This annual event could alternate between Canada and France. Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon's proximity to Canada could be an asset for organizing one of these study days. Panels would be made up of young researchers in the social and natural sciences, French and Canadian institutions and military personnel. This annual event will contribute to bilateral reflection on these issues and the strengthening of expert networks.

Finally, the MINDS program, the DGRIS and the IRSEM could initiate discussions to co-finance a doctoral scholarship for a candidate who will benefit from the dual French-Canadian university supervision.

The strengthening of these strategic research links could be achieved through a necessary **update of the French Polar Strategy**. By updating the new geopolitical context, notably with the integration of Sweden and Finland into NATO, this update could also highlight the necessary **increase in joint search and rescue training** between the Canadian and French navies, and between the French Army and the Canadian Rangers.

Finally, we believe it is vital to continue encouraging the **sharing of scientific data and information** on misinformation (particularly on Arctic infrastructures) and on the multiple risks and impacts of climate change (e.g. on the presence of viruses and bacteria in permafrost) between Canada, France and their allies, along the lines, for example, of [the Takuvik international research program](#) between Université Laval and CNRS.

Initial measures have already been announced during Emmanuel Macron's visit to Canada at the end of September 2023. France and Canada [called](#) for working together to foster the development of a stronger partnership in defence and security. Several actions were announced to strengthen support for Ukraine and maritime surveillance in the Indo-Pacific. The two countries also reiterated their commitment to NATO's Action Plan on Climate Change and Security. At the end of 2023, this led to the opening in Montreal of the NATO Centre of Excellence for Climate Change and Security, staffed by Canadians, French and members of other allied countries.

With regard to the Canadian Arctic, France and Canada recalled their collaboration within Operation NANOOK, with joint military exercises. Both countries wish to increase joint navigation exercises, experience sharing, interoperability and crew training in polar environments, taking advantage in particular of the expertise and support of the Canadian armed forces in the Canadian Arctic. Another point of interest on our subject is that Ottawa and Paris wish to strengthen their exchanges to respond effectively to threats of interference, a vital measure in the fight against interference in the Arctic region. This also ties in with initiatives taken at the last G7 in Italy, thanks to the [G7 Rapid Response Mechanism](#) set up at the G7 in Charlevoix in June 2018. This strengthens G7-wide coordination to detect, prevent and counter threats to member countries' democracies.

About the Authors

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