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“Russian Arctic Military Exercise Draws Awe and Concern” ... and Promotes Misconceptions about the Canadian Armed Forces and Threats to the Canadian Arctic?

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[Murray Brewster’s 11 May 2020 article](#) published by *CBC News* certainly has dramatic appeal: Russian paratroopers jumping out of a plane at high altitude, landing on an austere archipelago in that country’s High Arctic, and fighting “a three-day mock battle in a winter wasteland” to test new cold weather equipment. “The recent exercise on Franz Josef Land ... has set the defence and diplomatic communities abuzz, particularly in Canada, which has its own Far North island chain,” the esteemed journalist suggests in a deliberate attempt to link the Russian Arctic to our own.

Two prominent Canadian academics expressed awe and concern about the military spectacle. “It’s the highest altitude drop we’ve seen,” political scientist Andrea Charron exclaims – which, coupled with the subsequent three-day training exercise, represents “an incredible feat of human endurance whether you look at it from a military perspective, or any perspective. That is just an incredible display of logistics, courage and ingenuity.” She astutely observes that the highly-touted exercise, billed by as a commemorative activity on the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day, helps to “detract from the fact that Russia now has over 200,000 confirmed COVID cases and by all accounts Russia is not managing it very well.”

Should NATO “imply any sort of intent by this exercise,” Charron asks? This raises the important question of what strategic messaging the Russians seek to convey by mounting and publicizing an activity of this nature. There is no question in fellow political scientist Rob Huebert’s mind: he depicts the exercise as “an unmistakable message from Russia to NATO,” conveying Russia’s intent “to be *the* military power in the Arctic region” (emphasis added). He suggests that “Russia’s Arctic ambitions are partly about northern resources being laid bare by climate change, but also a reflection of its desire to demonstrate that no one is going to mess with its nuclear fleet bases.” In short, Huebert sees the paratrooper drop as both a reflection of Russia’s commitment to defend (or expand?) its Arctic space as a strategic resource base (a regional lens) and an aspect of strategic deterrence (a global issue). He offers no clear determination of which level of analysis might be most appropriate to interpret this specific exercise, however, and compresses it all together in a single threat narrative that connects directly to Canada.

What is Russia’s Arctic strategy? Charron emphasizes the importance of Western analysts carefully discerning Russian motivations, particularly in our current context of uncertainty, in hopes that we can avoid

“misunderstandings, incidents and accidents.” This is prudent advice. Is it primarily domestic-oriented and defensive, bolstering Putin’s declared intent to transform the Arctic into his country’s “foremost strategic base for natural resources” and to dramatically expand shipping along the Northern Sea Route (NSR)? Is it about symbolic power projection, designed to show strength to the Russian public and promote the nationalistic spirit of heroism and perseverance? Is it about showcasing military capabilities to intimidate Arctic neighbours, force them to bow to Russia’s wishes, or an indication that Russia intends to behave in an aggressively revisionist manner as it did in Ukraine and Syria?

Huebert insists that “Norway and Canada, in particular, should both be paying close attention” to what the Russians are doing. We agree – although we question why this would be of more particular importance to Canada than to the United States, Sweden, or Finland. Furthermore, Huebert’s statement is a slippery one. Failing to differentiate between the threat environment in the European High North, which borders Russia’s most heavily militarized region, to that in the Canadian Arctic can lead to misleading correlations and unfortunate leaps of logic.

Different security dynamics exist for different parts of the Arctic. What could the Russian military do in the Canadian Arctic with its airborne capability? Simply deploying soldiers into the region would pose logistical challenges far beyond any activities in its own Arctic and maintaining them would be a nightmare. Canada’s frequent Arctic exercises over the last two decades highlight persistent supply and mobility constraints, even with uncontested lines of supply and communication. A small insertion of self-sustaining airborne soldiers into Canadian territory would be feasible – but not for long. This is not because the Russians are “laughable,” but because geophysical conditions still constrain military movements to and in the various Arctic regions.

Equally uncertain is what Russian forces would want to do in the Canadian Arctic, given that the region has few targets of strategic significance that would warrant capture or destruction by paratroopers. During the Cold War, Canadian planners feared that Russian commandos might capture Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line/North Warning System (NWS) facilities to blind NORAD to incoming Russian bombers. In the era before Russian strategic bombers could reach North American cities without refuelling, some strategic analysts also feared that Soviet paratroops might capture Arctic airfields to support long-range air missions against the continental heartland. In the 21st century, long-range Russian bombers do not need to capture Arctic airfields to strike at North American targets. Furthermore, radar installations, airfields, and other Arctic infrastructure can be more easily destroyed by air- or sea-launched cruise missiles, fired from safe locations closer to Russia, than by paratroops. Even in the late Cold War, when the Russian threat was more acute than it is today, the Canadian military remained sceptical of this threat narrative. “It is difficult to discern the motivation for such incursions as the resources required would be large for limited reward,” a 1971 Force Development report noted. Huebert does not explain how or why that equation has changed.

While the CBC article concedes that Canadian and American forces have conducted cold weather Arctic exercises for years, Huebert stresses that the Russians “conducted their drill while the weather was still pretty miserable, not in the summer when Canada’s main Arctic training – Operation Nanook – takes place.” This statement overlooks several striking realities. In 2018, the Canadian military expanded and transformed Nanook into an ongoing, all-season operation encompassing a wide range of activities across the North. Describing it as

a “summer training exercise” is incorrect and misleading. Furthermore, the Canadian Army has trained extensively in the Arctic each winter for more than a decade. Starting with Exercise *Northern Bison* (2008) in Manitoba, recurring land force exercises such as *Arctic Ram*, *Guerrier Nordique*, *Stalwart Goose*, and Operation *Nunavut* have been trained Canadian Army elements (including the Arctic Response Company Groups) in harsh winter conditions no less severe than those on remote Russian Arctic islands. The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Arctic Training Centre in Resolute Bay, Nunavut, which operates during the winter, spring, summer, and early fall, is capable of providing staging and facilitating force projection across the Canadian High Arctic. In short, Huebert misconstrues the Canadian Army’s Arctic training as a single-season exercise conducted in the balmy summer to contrast the CAF’s alleged unpreparedness and weakness compared to the hardy, strong Russians. This is unfair and unrepresentative.

While Charron acknowledges that the CAF has conducted “Far North exercises in winter,” she emphasizes that “the Russians have figured out how to do it on a sustained basis.” Accordingly, she insists that Western militaries “will have to step up and see whether these are skills we need to work on.” This call “to step up and see” invites careful analysis before allocating resources to match or counter Russian activities. Several of the [Department of National Defence MINDS program challenge](#) questions for 2020-21 frame issues related to Russia, the Arctic, and force development. These questions include: What are Russia’s strategic objectives in an era of resurgent strategic competition? Do conventional forms of land force projection such as paratroopers represent a tangible threat to Canadian peace and security, or are they a distraction from more probable gray zone/hybrid threats and emerging capabilities that exploit gaps in continental defence? What is the realistic scope of responsibility that Canada’s Defence Team can and should assume in the Arctic?

Both Huebert and Charron are convinced that this Russian exercise requires that Western militaries “step up.” But what are we stepping up to defend against? Should we redeploy CAF resources from elsewhere in the world – or from roles in COVID-19 response – to showcase our own airborne or special force capabilities to defeat would-be Russian paratroop adversaries?

Statements by the Defence Team over the last decade do not anticipate any direct, near-term conventional military threats to the Canadian Arctic. This does not mean that there is nothing to worry about in the region, but it does encourage us to pause before we jump at any Russian display of Arctic military capability and assume that it constitutes a threat to the North American Arctic. Instead, as Charron intimates, we need to ask some basic questions about if that capability can be reasonably used against Canada, what strategic intent lies behind it, and whether our energies and resources to defeat and deter specific threats are better invested elsewhere. General Terrence O’Shaughnessy, the commander of NORAD, lays out a convincing case of why “the homeland is not a sanctuary” in a world of resurgent major power competition and emergent threats to our continent within and beyond traditional domains. But Russian paratroopers landing on Franz Josef Land in the Russian High Arctic as a threat to Canada’s “own Far North island chain”? We may be in awe of this display of capability, but we are not concerned.