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## Threats Through, To, and In the Arctic: A Framework for Analysis

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### Purpose

The briefing note proposes the value of a model that deliberately parses whether analysts are discussing threats *through*, *to*, or *in* the Canadian Arctic.

### Background

Canada's 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)*, confirms that the Arctic remains an area of particular interest and focus, highlighting its cultural and economic importance as well as rapid environmental, economic, and social changes that present opportunities and generate or amplify security challenges. To meet those challenges and "succeed in an unpredictable and complex security environment," the Government of Canada commits to an ambitious program of naval construction, capacity enhancements, and technological upgrades to improve situational awareness, communications, and the ability of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to operate across the Canadian Arctic. The justifications for these investments include a range of drivers and dynamics often compressed into a single narrative, with the Arctic

region highlighted as "an important international crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security meet."<sup>1</sup>

Current North American defence modernization discussions are likely to amplify the debate about the nature of Arctic security. In early 2020, NORAD commander General Terrance O'Shaughnessy argued that "geographic barriers that kept our homeland beyond the reach of most conventional threats" no longer guarantee North America as a "sanctuary," and "the Arctic is no longer a fortress wall ... [but an avenue] of approach for advanced conventional weapons and the platforms that carry them."<sup>2</sup> He insisted that "Russia has left us with no choice but to improve our homeland defense capability and capacity. In the meantime, China has taken a number of incremental steps toward expanding its own Arctic presence."<sup>3</sup> With climate change "opening new access" to the region, *SSE* states that "Arctic and non-Arctic states alike are looking to benefit from the potential economic opportunities associated with new resource development and transportation routes." What does this mean for a country with Arctic policies predicated on the idea of the region as a *place* (and

particularly an Indigenous homeland) rather than a threat vector? How do measures to address strategic threats to North America passing *through* the Canadian Arctic relate to threats *to* the region or *in* the region?

## Discussion

Threats passing *through* the Canadian Arctic emanate from outside of the region and pass through or over it to strike targets also outside of the region. For example, a ballistic missile with conventional warheads launched from Russia would likely pass over the Canadian Arctic before striking at a target in the northern continental United States. Sensor systems that detect the launch and track the missile might be based in the Arctic, but it would be misconstrued as an *Arctic* threat in a defence of North America context.

Threats *to* the Canadian Arctic are those that emanate from outside of the region and affect the region itself. Examples could include a below-the-threshold attack on critical Arctic infrastructure, a foreign vessel running aground in Canadian waters with deleterious environmental effects, the introduction of a pandemic, or the acquisition of a port or airfield at a strategic location by a company owned and controlled by a non-like-minded state.

Threats *in* the Arctic originate within the region and have primary implications for the region. Examples include permafrost degradation threatening critical infrastructure, the failure of a diesel-electric generator powering an isolated community, or heightened polarization of public debate leading to economic or political disruption.

Some threats, such as climate change (which is caused by activities outside the region and thus represents a threat *to* it, while regional and local climate dynamics *in* the Arctic such as extreme

weather threaten local residents), will straddle these categories, but this conceptual exercise around threats can help to determine appropriate scales for preparedness and response, and by which primary stakeholders, to different threats rather than bundling them all together as a generic laundry list of “Arctic threats.”

## Threats *Through* the Canadian Arctic: Situating the Arctic in a Global Context

For nearly a century, Canada has invested in building and sustaining an international system that reflects its values and interests. A shifting balance of power and the re-emergence of major power competition now threatens to undermine or strain the established international order and rules-based system. China, as an emerging economic superpower, aspires to a global role proportionate to its economic weight, population, and self-perception as the Middle Kingdom. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s recent declaration that liberalism is “obsolete”<sup>4</sup> affirms that his country has deviated from its early post-Cold War path, and its revisionist behaviour in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria exemplify Russia’s willingness to test the international security environment. Consequently, Canada’s role is less obvious in the emerging multipolar world, which challenges the Western-designed security system, than it was in the bipolar Cold War order or the unipolar moment that followed. This creates more space for emerging state and non-state actors to exercise influence, including in the Arctic.

Within this broader context, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* highlights three key security trends that will continue to shape events: the evolving balance of power, the changing nature of conflict, and the

rapid evolution of technology. All of these trends have direct and indirect application when contemplating and imagining future Arctic security environments, vulnerabilities, and requirements. Furthermore, Canada's ANPF emphasizes that:

The international order is not static; it evolves over time to address new opportunities and challenges. The Arctic and the North is in a period of rapid change that is the product of both climate change and changing geopolitical trends. As such, international rules and institutions will need to evolve to address the new challenges and opportunities facing the region. As it has done in the past, Canada will bolster its international leadership at this critical time, in partnership with Northerners and Indigenous peoples, to ensure that the evolving international order is shaped in a manner that protects and promotes Canadian interests and values.<sup>5</sup>

In a complex security environment characterized by trans-regional, multi-domain, and multi-functional threats, Canada must continue to work with its allies to understand the broader effects of the return of major power competition to the international system and to regions like the Arctic, and what this means for Canadian defence relationships and partnerships. Emerging threats to North America, across all domains, must be situated in the context of continental defence and the longstanding Canada-U.S. defence partnership exemplified by NORAD. Resurgent major power competition and advances in weapons technology pose new threats to continental security, however, which require NORAD to modernize and evolve to meet current and future threats.

Both *SSE* and the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework underscore the importance of NORAD

modernization efforts, the integration of layered sensor and defeat systems, and improving the CAF's reach and mobility in the Arctic within this alliance construct. New commitments, however, will require creative thinking about infrastructure, surveillance and detection, interception capabilities, and command and control relationships. US Northern Command and NORAD highlight the importance of advanced sensors that can detect, track, and discriminate advanced cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, hypersonics, and small unmanned aerial systems at full ranges (as well the platforms that carry these weapons), as well as new mechanisms to defeat advance threat systems (including advanced cruise missiles capable of striking North America "from launch boxes in the Arctic").<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, talk of the need to "harden the shield" to project a credible deterrent against conventional and below-the-threshold attacks on North America anticipates new Canada-U.S. solutions that will incorporate Arctic sensors and systems in a layered "ecosystem" of sensors, fusion functions, and defeat mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Canada is working with its NATO allies to re-examine conventional deterrence and how to counter adversarial activities "below the threshold" of armed conflict in the Arctic. The statement in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* that "NATO has also increased its attention to Russia's ability to project force from its Arctic territory into the North Atlantic, and its potential to challenge NATO's collective defence posture" marks a measured shift in Canada's official position. Despite Canada's reticence to have the alliance adopt an explicit Arctic role over the past decade, the inclusion of this reference – as well as the commitment to "support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO" – indicates a newfound openness to multilateral engagement on "hard security" in the

Arctic with its European allies. NATO is the cornerstone of both Danish and Norwegian defence and security policy, which also opens opportunities for enhanced bilateral relationships. How this newfound interest in NATO's Arctic posture interacts with Canada's longstanding preference to partner bilaterally with the U.S. on North American continental defence remains to be clarified in the next decade.

## Threats *to* and *in* the Canadian Arctic: Towards a Whole-of-Society Approach

The growing realization of the disproportionate impact of anthropogenic climate change on the circumpolar region, and concomitant social, economic and environmental consequences for the rest of the world, also commands global attention. Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework highlights that "the Canadian North is warming at about 3 times the global average rate, which is affecting the land, biodiversity, cultures and traditions." This rapid change is "having far-reaching effects on the lives and well-being of northerners, threatening food security and the transportation of essential goods and endangering the stability and functioning of delicate ecosystems and critical infrastructure." There is extensive Canadian interest in how these changes affect Northern peoples and the environment that sustains them at local and domestic scales, as well as the implications of rising international interest in the region. Although non-Arctic observers have traditionally confined their polar interest to scientific research and environmental issues, over the past decade significant international interest and attention has turned to oil, gas and minerals, fisheries, shipping and Arctic governance. In turn, this has generated debates amongst Arctic states about non-Arctic

states' intentions and their receptiveness to welcoming Asian countries in particular "into the Arctic cold."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, while most Canadian analysts now downplay the probability of military and security threats to or in the Canadian Arctic over resources or sovereignty in a direct sense, globalization and growing interest in large-scale development of natural resources mean more activity in the Arctic. This increasing activity means a growing need to understand, monitor and react to activities affecting security. NATO's 2017 Strategic Foresight Analysis notes that "the growing number of stakeholders combined with the interconnected nature of the international system, the exponential rate of change and the confluence of trends has continued to increase the potential for disorder and uncertainty in every aspect of world affairs."<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, Canadians must look to more comprehensive approaches that accept and incorporate complexity and uncertainty. The ANPF observes that "the qualities that make the Canadian Arctic and North such a special place, its size, climate, and small but vibrant and resilient populations, also pose unique security challenges, making it difficult to maintain situational awareness and respond to emergencies or military threats when and where they occur." Climate change compounds these challenges, reshaping the regional environment and, in some contexts and seasons, facilitating greater access to an increasingly "broad range of actors and interests" (both Canadian and international). Accordingly, the ANPF emphasizes that

to protect the safety and security of people in the region and safeguard the ability to defend the Canadian Arctic and North, and North America now and into the future, a multi-faceted and holistic approach is required. The complexity of the regional security environment places a premium on



collaboration amongst all levels of government, Indigenous peoples and local communities, as well as with trusted international partners.

Given the high proportion of Indigenous people (Inuit, First Nations, and Métis) in Canada's Arctic population, as well as Ottawa's political focus on improving Indigenous-Crown relations and promoting reconciliation, the Canadian Arctic and North has a much higher political profile than simple population statistics and parliamentary representation numbers might suggest. As the *Arctic Human Development Report* notes, Indigenous peoples' "efforts to secure self-determination and self-government are influencing Arctic governance in ways that will have a profound impact on the region and its inhabitants in the years to come."<sup>10</sup> Canadian reports highlight longstanding inequalities in transportation, energy, communications, employment, community infrastructure, health services, and education that continue to disadvantage Northerners compared to other Canadians. Furthermore, poor socio-economic and health indicators also point to significant gaps between Northern Canadian jurisdictions and their southern counterparts, elucidating higher rates of human insecurity *in* the Canadian Arctic. Accordingly, Canada's defence and security policies and practices align with its broader national strategy for the Canadian Arctic and the Circumpolar North, which promotes "a shared vision of the future where northern and Arctic people are thriving, strong and safe."<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

Changing power dynamics in the Arctic are unlikely to derive from disputes over regional disputes over

boundary disputes, resources, or regional governance in the next fifteen years, and instead will be a reflection of broader international forces and dynamics. Accordingly, Canada's Arctic faces no near-term conventional military threats – although resurgent strategic competition globally may have "spill over" effects on circumpolar security. In the case of the North American Arctic, observations or drivers associated with geostrategic competition at the *international* systemic level should not be misapplied to objective and subjective geographical assessments of the *regional* Arctic security environment.<sup>12</sup> Although the evolving international balance of power may undermine global peace and security, this is not necessarily a zero-sum game in terms of *Arctic* regional stability.

Rather than promoting a narrative of inherent competition or impending conflict, *SSE* emphasizes that "Arctic states have long cooperated on economic, environmental, and safety issues, particularly through the Arctic Council, the premier body for cooperation in the region. All Arctic states have an enduring interest in continuing this productive collaboration." This last sentence suggests that Russia (described elsewhere in the policy document as a state "willing to test the international security environment" that had reintroduced "a degree of major power competition") has vested national interests in a stable circumpolar region. Accordingly, the drivers of Arctic change in Canada's defence policy emphasize the rise of security and safety challenges *in* the Arctic rather than conventional defence threats *to* the Arctic, thus confirming the line of reasoning that has become well entrenched in defence planning over the last decade.<sup>13</sup> *SSE* also highlights how international threats may pass *through* the Arctic to reach targets outside of the region.

## Recommendations

The Arctic is inextricably tied to the rest of Canada, to North America, and to the international system as a whole. This interconnectedness brings opportunities for communities, governance, and economic development, and also poses complex, multifaceted challenges. Accordingly, strategic forecasters must situate the Canadian Arctic in global, regional, and domestic contexts to anticipate new challenges, promote effective adaptations to changing circumstances, and identify how the military should be trained and equipped to act decisively in concert with its allies.

Anticipating and addressing twenty-first century challenges requires clear, coordinated action in

order to leverage the broad and deep expertise of the modern state and civil society. In the defence and security realm, Canada's ANPF emphasizes that meeting "enormous collective challenges requires coordinated action across the whole-of-government – military capabilities working hand in hand with diplomacy and development." Taken together, the opportunities, challenges, increased competition, and risks associated with a more accessible (and unpredictable) Arctic require a greater presence of security organizations, strengthened emergency management, and improved situational awareness. They also require more fidelity in anticipating and preparing to address different threats through, to, and in Arctic regions.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of National Defence (DND), *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (2017), 79, <http://dgpaapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> 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, 13 February 2020, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/O'Shaughnessy\\_02-13-20.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/O'Shaughnessy_02-13-20.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Statement of General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy before the Senate Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, 3 March 2020, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/O'Shaughnessy\\_03-03-20.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/O'Shaughnessy_03-03-20.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Lionel Barber, "Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete,'" *Financial Times*, 27 June 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

<sup>5</sup> CIRNAC, *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework*.

<sup>6</sup> O'Shaughnessy to Senate Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, 3 March 2020. See also Nancy Teeple and Ryan Dean, eds., *Shielding North America: Canada's Role in All-Domain Continental Defence* (Peterborough: NAADSN Engage Series, forthcoming 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy and Peter M. Fesler, "Hardening the Shield: A Credible Deterrent & Capable Defense for North America" (Washington: Canada Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, September 2020), [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Hardening%20the%20Shield\\_A%20Credible%20Deterrent%20%26%20Capable%20Defense%20for%20North%20America\\_EN.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Hardening%20the%20Shield_A%20Credible%20Deterrent%20%26%20Capable%20Defense%20for%20North%20America_EN.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, P.E. Solli, E. Wilson Rowe, and W. Yennie Lindgren, "Coming into the Cold: Asia's Arctic Interests," *Polar Geography*, 36/4 (2013): 253-270; Kimie Hara and Ken Coates, eds., *East Asia-Arctic Relations: Boundary, Security and International Politics* (Waterloo: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2014); and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Adam Lajeunesse, James Manicom, and Frédéric Lasserre, *China's Arctic ambitions and what they mean for Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> NATO, *Strategic Foresight Analysis Report 2017* (Brussels: NATO, 2017), [https://www.act.nato.int/application/files/1016/0565/9725/171004\\_sfa\\_2017\\_report\\_hr.pdf](https://www.act.nato.int/application/files/1016/0565/9725/171004_sfa_2017_report_hr.pdf).

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<sup>10</sup> Joan Nymand Larsen and Gail Fondahl, *Arctic Human Development Report (AHDR-II)* (Copenhagen: Nordisk Ministerråd, 2015), <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:788965/FULLTEXT03.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> CIRNAC, *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework*. As non-state actors and non-Arctic state actors seek greater influence on Arctic affairs, the Government of Canada may also face challenges to its legitimacy and credibility. Furthermore, increasing polarization, regionalization, and fragmentation within North American society could deepen distrust in conventional politics and politicians, exposing vulnerabilities that are susceptible to outside influence and can be exploited to disrupt the social fabric and sow seeds of disunity. A declining sense of fate control, lingering anxieties about sovereignty, and concerns about an increasingly complex future could also prove sources of greater uncertainty and social and political division. In an increasingly globalized information and social media environment, adversaries are likely to use disinformation and misinformation strategies to influence Canadian opinion, undermine sources of strength, and complicate decision making in the Arctic and elsewhere. For a recent discussion, see Troy Bouffard and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Russian Arctic Strategies: Ambitions and Near-Term Expectations," NAADSN Ideas Talk (by Zoom), 4 December 2020, <https://www.naadsn.ca/events/naadsn-ideas-series-russian-arctic-strategies-ambitions-and-near-term-expectations/>.

<sup>12</sup> 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 (November 2019): 1-64, <https://jmss.org/article/view/69488/53633>.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Franklyn Griffiths, Rob Huebert, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Canada and the Changing Arctic: Sovereignty, Security and Stewardship* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011); Adam Lajeunesse and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "The Canadian Armed Forces in the Arctic: Building Appropriate Capabilities." *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 16/4 (2016): 7-66; and P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Heather Nicol, eds., *Whole of Government through an Arctic Lens* (Antigonish: Mulroney Institute on Government, 2017).