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Conceptualizing Arctic Security in an Era of Strategic Competition: A Canadian Perspective

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Thank you for the opportunity to join this distinguished panel and to offer some opening remarks.

Russia’s further invasion of Ukraine beginning in late February has confirmed that Arctic cooperation is not insulated from the events of the broader world. We have witnessed the spillover of international tensions into the sphere of circumpolar affairs, which raises fundamental questions about the longstanding commitment to maintain peace and stability in the region. That said, I think that we need to be more careful than ever to base our decisions on well-grounded assumptions about Arctic defence and security.

First, I do not think that there is a greater likelihood of conflict arising over ARCTIC disputes – so resources, Arctic boundaries, Arctic state sovereignty, or commercial access to shipping lanes – than there was a month or even five years ago. It is essential that NATO correctly appraise the nature of the “Arctic threat” and make sure that we are focusing on the right level of analysis to deal with it.

I have several caveats to begin. First, I consider that competition between states is normal – and does not inherently mean conflict. So, the fact that the Kingdom of Denmark, Russia, and Canada have overlapping continental shelf claims beyond our respective EEZs does not mean that we are

likely to fight over this. We all want to maximize our national jurisdiction, but we all remain committed to international legal processes in the Arctic – and I do not see this changing in the Arctic. After all, Russia has the most to gain in the Arctic, by any metric, through having the region follow the spirit of the [Ilulissat Declaration](#) – and its inexcusable aggression in Ukraine does not change this.

Second, we sometimes talk about “THE ARCTIC” as if it is a single geopolitical and geostrategic space. Some issues and threats are truly circumpolar in orientation, but other aspects are best considered through a sub-regional perspective. For the Kingdom of Denmark, this might include asking whether there are specific threats to the European Arctic – and by extension, the North Atlantic - that are different from the threats facing the North American Arctic. (I was in Nuuk last week, and it was striking to be out sailing in open water in March – something that is simply not possible in Canada’s frozen Arctic waters at this time of year!) These are considerations that are certainly of critical importance to NATO.

The framework that I use to help me sort out Arctic defence and security threats is one of distinguishing between threats IN, TO, and THROUGH the Arctic.

The first category are threats that pass THROUGH or OVER the Arctic to strike at targets outside the region. These include cruise missiles, hyperkinetic glide vehicles, ballistic missiles, and bombers. It is notable that these weapons and delivery systems are not primarily oriented at striking Arctic targets – they are strategic systems geared towards global balance of power and deterrence. I think that it is best to situate these threats on the international level of analysis – not the regional security one. That stated, they do have an Arctic nexus, because we have Arctic capabilities that are important to detect and defeat these global threats – and probably should be investing in more. But to suggest that these are about defending the Arctic, rather than about defending our homelands more generally, is a misrepresentation.

The second category are threats TO the Arctic. These are threats that emanate from outside a particular sub-region of the Arctic and threaten a particular sub-region or location or Arctic NATO member or partner. Some are kinetic military threats – we might think of Thule as an obvious target in a case of a general world war, given its strategic significance. But I don’t think that most of the threats to the Arctic are traditional military ones. We might also think of misinformation campaigns designed to undermine the credibility of an Arctic actor or to polarize debate on a sensitive issue. And this category might include a below the threshold attack on a piece of critical infrastructure, such as a power plant, that would be designed to create panic and force an Arctic state to direct its efforts and resources to dealing with that problem. This category would also include climate change, in a broad sense, as well pandemics. NATO will have to grapple with what is particularly “Arctic” about the threats TO its member states and partners in the region, and why and how these require specific “Arctic” treatment.

The third category are threats IN the Arctic. This includes a basket of threats associated with environmental and climate change, as well as major air disasters or maritime disasters. I see the threats in the region as primarily on the soft security and safety side of the operational mission spectrum. And while our militaries are often called upon to respond to emergencies, I think that it is problematic to simply lump these threats in with threats through and to the region.

I should note that Canada's position on NATO and the Arctic has changed in the last six years. NATO has always had an Arctic presence by virtue of its member states: the Kingdom of Denmark, Canada, the United States, and Norway. Nevertheless, until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2013, Canada expressed concerns about NATO adopting a vocal, explicit Arctic strategy or posture for two main reasons: (1) to avoid unnecessarily antagonizing Russia; and (2) because Canada preferred to deal with Arctic issues (which Canadians typically equate with the Canadian or North American Arctic) bilaterally with the United States. This has changed.

[Canada's 2017 defence policy](#) is generally quite good at distinguishing between the international and Arctic regional levels of analysis, and it references NATO's role vis-à-vis Russian force projection into the North Atlantic (rather than concern about military conflict arising from Arctic disputes):

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. Canada and its NATO Allies have been clear that the Alliance will be ready to deter and defend against any potential threats, including against sea lines of communication and maritime approaches to Allied territory in the North Atlantic.

To wrap up my opening comments, I want to emphasize that as the Arctic becomes a more explicit NATO priority, we need to carefully distinguish between military threats to North American, North Atlantic, and Nordic security that may *pass through* regions of the Arctic and risks/threats arising *from* Arctic disputes (remain unlikely, particularly in the North American Arctic). In short, levels of analysis matter, and we must be careful to situate the threats at the appropriate level (international, regional, national) before simply declaring that NATO is needed to meet all aspects of the evolving "Arctic security" environment.