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## Russian International Aggression and the Arctic: *Why Strong, Secure, Engaged* Remains Relevant

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Russia's further invasion of Ukraine has been a shock to the international order, affirming the end of the American unipolar world and the return of a multipolarity marked by strategic competition. Russia's lack of adherence to international law and its disrespect for the norms that informed these laws has led many Canadian commentators to link Ukraine to the Arctic, a region underpinned by liberal institutionalism. This link became especially explicit with the [temporary "pausing" of the Arctic Council](#) in late February. "There's no doubt the global security environment has changed," National Defence Minister Anita Anand told the Conference of Defence Association Institute on 11 March, adding "there is no question that our foreign policy, and certainly our defence policy has to adapt." Does this mean that the assumptions and framing of Arctic issues in Canada's 2017 defence white paper [Strong, Secured, Engaged](#) (SSE) require fundamental revision?

We contend that SSE remains relevant because it appropriately situates threats using levels of analysis. On an international level, SSE frames Russia as a revisionist power that has "proven its willingness to test the international security environment." That the degree of great power competition has increased over time, which SSE accommodates.

When SSE moves to the Arctic's regional level of analysis, it adopts language that does not fixate on conventional military threats to Canada's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Rather than adopting a "Thinning Ice" thesis, which suggests that regional threats over Arctic boundaries and resources will generate inter-state conflict that will explode onto the international stage,<sup>1</sup> SSE highlights challenges associated with climate change and how Arctic states have cooperated to identify and address environmental and socio-economic risks and hazards. "All Arctic states have an enduring interest in continuing this productive collaboration," the white paper concludes in an Arctic context. Rather than conflict originating in the Arctic, SSE recognizes that the opposite is most likely: that international geopolitical dynamics in an era of strategic competition will "spillover" affecting Arctic regional relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> For the core articles framing Thinning Ice, see Rob Huebert "Climate Change and Canadian Sovereignty in the Northwest Passage," *Isuma* 2:4 (2001): 86-94 and "The Shipping News Part II: How Canada's Arctic Sovereignty is on thinning ice," *International Journal* 58:3 (2003): 295-308.

Even the strongest proponents of the Thinning Ice school of thought now focus their attention on “spillover” of international geopolitics into circumpolar northern affairs.<sup>2</sup> *SSE* accommodates this “spillover” idea by identifying the need to adapt institutions to changing geopolitical realities. The white paper acknowledges that “existing international institutions need to adapt to new realities,” and that “it is in Canada’s interest that existing global governance mechanisms, including multilateral organizations and negotiation processes, work well, remain flexible and adapt to accommodate new perspectives.” This is more important than ever in the face of Russia’s brutal flouting of international law.

The carefully calibrated “pause” of the Arctic Council must be understood as a “spillover” of global dynamics and should not be misread as a response to regional level changes in the Arctic. It does not signal threats *to* or *in* the Arctic have become more acute, or that Russia’s intentions for the Arctic have suddenly shifted from predominantly benign to entirely bellicose. Indeed, it is telling that Russian official messaging has expressed regret that the West’s decision to freeze the activities of the Arctic Council (which Russia currently chairs) and throw into question regional peace and cooperation – a ridiculous assertion that seeks to pretend as if Russia’s violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and blatant violation of international law and norms would not affect generally cooperative relations in the Arctic.

As Commander of US Northern Command (NORTHCOM)/ North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) General Glen VanHerck clearly articulates, today’s most pressing international problems are global – not regional – in scope.<sup>3</sup> The “pausing” of the Arctic Council – a prime example of international geopolitics spilling over into regional relations – should be seen as a temporary action that fits within the framework of Canada’s defence and security priorities articulated in *SSE*.

Russia’s continued invasion of Ukraine does not render *SSE* obsolete because the white paper already emphasizes great power competition and an increasingly volatile global security environment. By parsing international and regional perspectives, it provides the conceptual space for institutions like the Arctic Council to respond and adapt to changes in the international system without suggesting that this is because the Arctic itself has changed.

Canada does not require a new defence policy. Instead, it requires the publication of what is often referred to as the “missing chapter” on North American defence modernization – and appropriate funding to see it through. With an increasingly uncertain global threat environment, we agree with successive NORAD commanders that the North American homeland is “no longer a sanctuary.” But Russia’s further invasion of Ukraine has not suddenly made the Canadian Arctic a more likely target from Russian military action. Overzealous commentators pointing out Canada’s maritime boundary with Russia often miss that the Arctic Ocean poses a very different challenge to a would-be invader than contiguous land borders between Russia/Belarus and Ukraine. Instead, we need to more clearly articulate how the Canadian Arctic will play an increasing vital role in detecting and deterring threats against the North American continent, bolstering continental and global situational awareness, and enabling Canada to work with its allies to defend against a military attack on the homeland – however unlikely the latter may be outside of a general world war.

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<sup>2</sup> For a history of Thinning Ice, see Rob Huebert and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, [Debating Arctic Security Selected Writings, 2010-2021](#) (Peterborough: NAADSN, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Lee Berthiaume, “Ukraine war sparks fresh calls for urgency on upgrading North America’s defences,” *National Post* 5 March 2022 at <https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/ukraine-war-sparks-fresh-calls-for-urgency-on-upgrading-north-americas-defences>.