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A Comment on *A Secure and Sovereign Arctic*

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The April 2023 Report of the [Standing Committee on National Defence, *A Secure and Sovereign Arctic*](#) is, by any measure, a welcome publication. As noted by many of the participants, the Arctic is, and will continue to be, an important component of Canadian thinking on defence and security. Focusing attention on the region and drawing on the expertise of contributors with the range of knowledge and depth of experience as the Committee did can only sharpen awareness of the pressing needs associated with the region. The Recommendations made by the Committee reflect the breadth of issues that require attention and provide an effective encapsulation of areas that require concerted action.

But therein also lies the first point of internal disjuncture. The Recommendations and the supporting report paint a picture of a Canada that is both in front of *and* behind the curve in the Arctic. It is clear from the comments made by experts that the current level of defence capabilities in the Arctic is sub-optimal, with improvements required in order to ensure the smooth operation of the military – highlighted particularly by the expressed need for better surveillance capacity. However, it is also the case that the military threat related to the Arctic is one that is most likely to be manifested in the future, rather than representing an immediate short-term concern. As noted by Dr. Byers and Kevin Hamilton (p.23) for example, China is not seen as an “imminent” threat, and “does not – at present – have the capability to project military power towards the Canadian Arctic” (p.24), but instead represents a “potential for challenge to our sovereignty” (pp.23-24).

It is easy to criticize a document of this type, and readers should allow some latitude given the complexity of the subject matter and the challenge of covering such ground (both metaphorically and, in the case of the Arctic, quite literally). However, this does not make it immune from critique, and considering the Recommendations in the context of the comments made by the experts generates a number of loose threads that require further exploration. Epitomising the disconnect between identifying challenges and making Recommendations that represent solutions, it is notable that two of the threats related to the Arctic that were highlighted by the Committee were not addressed in the Recommendations. First, as noted by General Eyre, a primary military concern in the current Arctic defence context is that miscalculation or misunderstanding leads to unintended escalation (p.13). Dr. Charron’s reference to “build[ing] confidence” (p.54) is directly associated with this challenge. Slightly surprisingly, despite this significance none of the Recommendations offer a route to formal processes that are intended to reduce this risk. In a similar vein, the potential for the spread of disinformation among Arctic communities was noted by multiple contributors, including Dr. Kimball (p.17) and Dr. Roussel

(p.22), as a significant risk to Canadian security. However, there is little in the Recommendations that speaks directly to counteracting this threat.

It is also notable that the conversation in the document highlights the seams between Canadian defence activities and those of its key allies in the Arctic, acknowledging the need for Canada to work closely with other states in order to maximise its defence capability. The connection with the U.S. is the most obvious of these, particularly in the context of North American defence, but Dr. Fergusson also indicates that Canada must consider the Eastern approaches (p.33) to the Arctic. This also draws in the complex question, as noted by Dr. Massie, Lt.-Gen (Ret.) Parent, and Dr. Lackenbauer, about how Canada should integrate its Arctic defence operations with those of its European allies. Once more, the political and military structures that would need to be formalised or developed in order to effectively generate this conjoined capability remain unacknowledged in the Recommendations. The multilateral processes required to develop these structures or organisations would be lengthy and complex, but if Arctic defence is to be developed holistically, it is necessary to start thinking about their construction.

The absence of Recommendations relating to these forms of political activities speaks to a more fundamental challenge in the discussion of Arctic defence and security – that of defining the role of the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and assigning responsibility for action. The debate around the difference between ‘defence’ and ‘security’ is longstanding and it is not worth covering old ground here. Suffice to say, there is considerable overlap within both the Recommendations and the conversation covered in the report of issues that would traditionally be considered as matters of defence (such as the development of new missile threats (Recommendation 12), and those that appear to fall more towards into the “security” category (such as the installation of IT infrastructure to “provide increased and affordable Internet coverage” (Recommendation 17).

The consequence of this is to complicate the vision about the anticipated role of the DND in the Arctic, and blur the way in which Arctic security is perceived to be connected to Canadian defence. This is exacerbated by the lengthy conversation around ‘dual-use’ technology and linking infrastructure that is developed for Arctic communities to military use, including hangarage space (Recommendation 10) or improved internet connectivity. However, Recommendation 16, which indicates the need for renewable energy and modular nuclear units, is a task that is very much outside the usual scope of military activity. The Recommendation in itself is helpful – generating reliable energy supplies for Arctic communities would undoubtedly be a step forward, and as the Recommendation notes, is “necessary to support NORAD modernization”. The Recommendation does specify that it is a task for the “Government of Canada, in consultation with Northern and Indigenous communities as well as Indigenous leaders” (p.3), rather than the DND. Nevertheless, decisions about where to install this infrastructure, and which infrastructure to install at which location, potentially brings military needs into a conversation which is ostensibly intended to benefit the Arctic population. The danger in this context is, for want of a better term, ‘mission creep’. If ‘the Arctic’ is understood as the domain of the military and the Coast Guard, this opens a range of responsibility that requires a very different set of capabilities. Even if the DND does not have a direct function in meeting some of the Recommendations in this document,

taking on an advocacy role to ensure higher levels of Government support and funding for Arctic communities requires re-shaping our understanding of the place of the DND in civilian-military relations.

Recommendation 26 also raises important but unspoken questions. If the Arctic is to be “prioritized” in the development of CAF capabilities, what does this mean for Canadian defence operations elsewhere? This is not to suggest that the recommendation is unreasonable, or that the Arctic should not be the priority for Canadian defence activity in the coming years. Nevertheless, it is simply not possible for Canada to ‘prioritize’ all of its missions simultaneously, and an Arctic focus will necessarily mean that the full potential of Canadian capability cannot be deployed in other regions. In addition, calling for the Government of Canada to “reform domestic defence procurement processes” (p.5) is laudable but ultimately amounts to little more than hand-waving towards a fundamental reconfiguration of Canadian defence. It is important that the Recommendations reflect reality, and it would be counter-productive to sweep the procurement issue under the carpet, especially as it pertains directly to Canadian Arctic defence issues. However, the extent of the change required in order to solve this issue is daunting, and spreads well beyond the Arctic.

In sum, the report represents excellent work by the Committee, but it is only a first step in setting the framework for defence- and security-focused action in the Arctic. It is heartening to see that the Committee drew on such a range of experience and expertise, and were able to produce a coherent and compelling encapsulation of key issues in the Arctic. The Recommendations made in *Security and Sovereignty in the Arctic* represent an articulation of a sweeping array of actions that hold considerable promise in advancing Canadian goals in defence and security. However, these Recommendations also emphasise a subtle but crucial missing piece in the title of the document: a question mark. What does “security and sovereignty” actually mean for Canada in the context of the Arctic? Is the Canadian Arctic currently secure and sovereign? Or, if not, how will we know when this position has been attained?

As *A Secure and Sovereign Arctic* indicates, there is gap between the current Arctic capability and Canadian aspirations. Consequently, the next (and vital) step is for the DND to release an Arctic strategy document that provides an indication of how these Recommendations will be addressed, articulates the rationale for doing so, and provides greater clarity on how the DND will leverage its capabilities and expertise in service of Arctic defence. I look forward to reading it.