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Climate Security and the Arctic: Canadian Reflections

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We have witnessed the spillover of international tensions into circumpolar affairs over the past two years and this has raised fundamental questions about Arctic security. These questions are regularly linked to the idea of climate change opening new access to the region for strategic competition, necessitating more investments in Canadian military and constabulary capabilities in response. But I think that we need to be more careful than ever to base our decisions on well-grounded assessments of Arctic defence and security and how these actually link to climate change over specified time horizons.

I remain convinced that there is not a strong likelihood of armed conflict arising over long-standing Arctic disputes, Arctic resources, boundaries, state sovereignty, or shipping lanes. Nor do I see climate change as fundamentally changing the military threat environment to or in the Canadian Arctic over the next decade. Instead, I think that military risk is from the spillover of geopolitical conflicts elsewhere in the world into the Arctic.

There are several reasons why I think that media and political commentators are often confused. They rightly connect the Arctic to climate change because the polar regions are warming faster than anywhere on earth, the cryosphere is changing, and patterns of human activity in the region are changing as a result. But we need to carefully think about what these changes mean for different Arctic subregions (a theme that my colleagues Will Greaves, Andreas Osthagen, and others have highlighted).

In Canada, we often talk about “the Arctic” as if it is a single space. Some issues and threats are truly circumpolar in orientation, but other aspects are best considered through a regional perspective. For Canada, this might include recognizing the distinct threats faced in the Canadian Arctic and those facing

our allies in the European Arctic or in the Bering Strait. It might also mean that the opening of the Northern Sea Route north of Russia does not inherently mean that we should expect similar activity in the Canada's Arctic waters (including the Northwest Passage) along similar timeframes.

I do not think direct Russian military action against Canadian Arctic territory is likely, even with the ice melting – or at least it is not more likely than a kinetic attack elsewhere in North America. And I think that this logic holds true of China as well, at least looking out over the short- to medium-horizon.

When we are looking at long-term horizons I am more uncertain – but I want to see analysts embrace that uncertainty and apply formal methods of probabilities and forecasting models when asserting their assumptions. In my view, there is too much vague speculation linking Arctic climate futures to conflict that is rhetorical superficial rather than grounded in systematic analysis.

All that stated, Canadian Arctic does face a distinct constellation of security risks, and clearly understanding these risks will allow us to appropriately allocate resources and efforts to strengthen our short- and long-term defence and security. The framework I find helpful to sort Arctic defence and security threats of one that looks in, to, and through Arctic Canada.

The first category of threats includes those that pass through or over the Arctic to strike at targets outside the region, such as cruise missiles, hyperkinetic glide vehicles, bombers, and ballistic missiles. It is important, as I see it, to be cognizant that these weapon systems are not primarily oriented at striking Arctic targets. They are strategic systems geared toward deterrence and effecting the global balance of power. They have an Arctic nexus because we have or need to build Arctic capabilities that are important to detecting, deterring, and defending against these global threats – and climate change does affect the enabling infrastructure to, say, deploy our CF-18s from a forward operating location in the Arctic.

To suggest that addressing these threats is about defending the Arctic specifically, rather than about defending North America more generally, is erroneous. And it is important to remember that these weapon systems are not highly affected by changing Arctic climates or environmental conditions. Many are long-range standoff weapons, for example, and do not depend upon permafrost or specific water and ice conditions to launch.

The second category of threats are those to the Canadian Arctic. Here is where climate change is an obvious example of an existential threat – but it is not primarily a military one, and mitigating this threat requires global action. We can and should “green” our military forces and infrastructure in the Arctic, but we know that this will still not stem the overall tide of global climate change.

Military and hybrid threats may be directed at specific locations and populations in the Canadian Arctic – particularly as a prelude to a general war – but I do not think most of these are conventional military ones. Instead, we see a whole range of policing and enforcement issues associated with new patterns of maritime activity, from cruise ships to pleasure craft to marine scientific research – but talk of Russian or Chinese naval vessels entering Canadian Arctic waters strikes me as overblown. And we need to seriously ask whether the military is best suited to address most of the threats to the Canadian Arctic or whether it should be other agencies and partners.

Finally, we all know that Arctic Canada faces a crisis of equity that is being compounded by climate change, and I expect that adversaries can and will exploit our domestic inequities through disinformation efforts intended to sow discord, incite Canadians to question or lose faith in their governments and institutions, and destabilize domestic risk environments more generally. We must be vigilant to ensure that our discussions and debates about how to manage Arctic change are not hijacked by malicious foreign actors.

The third category of threats are those in the Canadian Arctic, which are generally human and environmental security issues – many of which have a climate change nexus. These include transportation safety threats, like major maritime disasters; threats to populations from basic energy and water infrastructure failures associated with climate change; permafrost degradation and effects on the structural integrity of houses, buildings, and runways; changes in seasonal weather and freeze up and then thaw patterns that make harvesting and travel on the land more unpredictable and dangerous; and food insecurity issues and disruptions to fragile Arctic supply chains. These issues and others are identified in Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s [National Inuit Climate Change Strategy](#) (2019), the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation’s [Inuvialuit Settlement Region Climate Change Strategy](#) (2021), and [Canada’s National Adaptation Strategy: Building Resilient Communities and a Strong Economy](#) (2023) – amongst many other documents.

As the water crisis in Iqaluit in 2021 demonstrated, and the response to the forest fires in the NWT affirmed this summer, Northern citizens look to Canada’s military capabilities for vital emergency response if and when essential systems and services fail. I love to highlight the contributions of the Canadian Rangers, who are often touted as the CAF’s “eyes, ears, and voice” across the North, to the Defence Team and also to their communities, including disaster resilience in the face of climate-induced emergencies. I also see the Rangers as an important success story in how DND can help to achieve reconciliation and build resiliency through inclusive partnerships. I would also highlight the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary, which has done an admirable job partnering with communities throughout Inuit Nunangat to expand capacity for local first responders, as well as Indigenous Guardians programs which

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draw upon federal funds so that Indigenous Peoples have greater opportunities to exercise responsibility in stewardship of their traditional lands, waters, and ice.

I think that there is still a need to coordinate these various actors. Along with my colleagues Peter Kikkert and Calvin Aivgak Pedersen, we have proposed the idea of an Inuit Nunangat Community Public Safety Officer to better synchronize and coordinate all of the tremendous expertise and energy that resides in Northern Indigenous communities. Empowerment also requires more proactive information sharing with communities – not just seeing Northern peoples as sources of information about climatic and environmental changes, but also as primary actors who need information to navigate changing conditions.

I'm over time, but when I think about climate security in the Arctic, I am careful not to immediately assume that the military sector of security is paramount unless we are talking about threats *through* the Arctic. Much of my energy these days is devoted to trying to discern how Whole of Government and Whole of Society approaches can better synchronize the tremendous capacity that we have in the North and chart a pathway to more coordinated efforts to address gaps and make smart investments in Arctic defence and security that are also aligned with civilian priorities wherever appropriate.