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## Arctic Security in *Our North Strong and Free*: Canada Needs to Get China and Russia Right

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The just-released policy update by the Canadian Department of National Defence, [\*Our North Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence\*](#), understandably had a strong focus on the Arctic. The region has seen a considerable increase in military activity, and great power political activity, since Canada's defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* appeared in 2017. The human security challenges posed by climate change are reflected in myriad ways across the Canadian Arctic, but the new policy also underlined the strategic challenges of a more accessible Arctic Ocean, with a corresponding need to promote Canadian sovereignty in the country's far northern reaches. Towards this end, the policy update promised that the Canadian government will augment Arctic accessibility and surveillance, announcing new sensor technology, a northern satellite ground station, regional operational support facilities for multifunctional purposes, and vehicles and equipment suited to difficult polar conditions.

The rationale for these policies, it is stressed, is to protect Canadian sovereignty in the face of challenges from adversarial powers, especially Russia and China. After the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine more than two years ago, concerns persist that the broken relations between Moscow and the West will inevitably spill over into the Arctic. With NATO now having added Finland and Sweden into its ranks, the Arctic is no longer a peripheral issue for the alliance. As for China, *Our North Strong and Free* describes its government as openly challenging international rules and norms and how, by Beijing's own admission, China is seeking to develop a more robust presence in the Arctic for economic and strategic reasons.

While few analysts would argue that China and Russia pose no significant challenges for Arctic security, the DND policy paper nonetheless also illustrates the need for Ottawa to better understand not only what both powers are seeking in the Arctic, but also to make more effective use of Canadian capabilities and northern allies to reduce the security risks that the two great powers have presented.

Moscow, described in the executive summary of the document as a "reckless and hostile adversary willing to undermine peace and stability in pursuit of its goals," has seen a shift in its military priorities towards subjugating Ukraine and threatening other states in Eastern Europe, but that has not meant that Russia has been ignoring the Arctic. In addition to building new icebreakers and opening new northern facilities over the past few years, Russian jets and submarines have been testing Western border security, while Russian Arctic strategies have

deepened through traditional means such as simulations like the *Vostok-2022* manoeuvres, as well as through hybrid conflict tactics.

Although normal operations of the Arctic Council have *de facto* resumed since Norway assumed the chairship last year, Moscow has announced that it was suspending its funding for the group to protest it not being able to participate fully in deliberations and has been candid about its interest in seeking out alternative forms of Arctic cooperation with China and other partners, potentially via the recently-expanded BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

While the new DND document promises stronger Arctic defence and monitoring in North America, including via NORAD, the proposed Canadian roles in assisting NATO in the Arctic are much less defined. The biggest issue there relates to NATO's calls since 2014 for all member states to raise their defence spending to two percent of GDP by 2024. Some countries, including the United Kingdom, the Baltic states, and Poland, having already met that goal. Others, like Norway, promise to reach that level by the end of this year. By comparison, Canada is seen as a laggard. The policy document calls for Canada to increase its defence budget to 1.76% by 2029-30, which may send (at best) mixed signals to other members of the alliance about the degree of Canadian commitment.

Moreover, although the Canadian contribution to Forward Land Forces in Latvia is mentioned in the paper, with plans to increase that commitment, there was little said about how Canada will contribute to assisting Nordic NATO members in deterring Russian Arctic threats there, especially as the alliance is swiftly seeking to develop a unified policy in the far north to reflect both Russian aggression and rapidly changing environmental conditions. A more concrete plan for the Atlantic-Arctic region, to compliment proposals to improve the defence of the North American Arctic, is essential. There is also much opportunity space for Canadian diplomatic initiatives between Ottawa and the Nordic region regarding military and hybrid security concerns.

Furthermore, given the emergence of the Atlantic-Arctic as a frontline region in the contested space between Russia and the West, the Canadian government should consider following the lead of Iceland, the United States, and more recently the European Union in opening up a diplomatic office in Nuuk, reflecting Greenland's growing importance in regional politics and trade, and building on the successful 2022 resolution of the longstanding Hans Island / Tartupaluk dispute.

The defence policy update's addressing of China's Arctic interests is problematic in parts, especially as it does not reflect the significant shifts in Beijing's far northern policies in recent years or China's overall reduced presence in the region. First, the paper cites the timeworn assertion that Beijing is seeking to become a 'polar great power' by 2030, a claim based largely on a 2014 statement from the country's (now defunct) State Oceanic Administration which detailed the need for China to enhance its scientific and research capabilities at both poles. The phrase used in those remarks, and in subsequent government statements, *jidi qianguo* (极地强国), is vague enough to potentially refer to both polar strength but also skills and capability, given that China's polar programmes are still relatively new compared with many other non-Arctic states.

Moreover, in the past decade China's military presence in the Arctic has been nominal at best, commonly in the form of joint operations with Russia, and primarily as signalling exercises towards the West. While China is indeed seeking to rapidly develop its overall naval capabilities, which will have significant effects on Indo-Pacific

security, it remains to be seen whether this will translate into any sort of shift in Arctic military strategy, especially given China's limited power-projection capabilities in the far north, and Russian sensitivity to its own Arctic sovereignty.

The DND paper also curiously notes that Beijing is "expanding its investments, infrastructure and industrial scientific influence throughout the Arctic region." This may have been the case when China and Russia were initially seeking to develop a Polar Silk Road in 2017, and when the Chinese government had ambitious investment plans spanning the Arctic Circle. Since then, however, almost all of China's planned Arctic investments outside of Russia have either stalled or failed. These include railways in the Nordic region, ports in Iceland and Norway, mining in Greenland, natural gas development in Alaska, and the Hope Bay mine purchase in Nunavut which was blocked by the Trudeau government in late 2020.

Beijing and Moscow continue to discuss joint investments in the Russian Arctic, and China has been an avid buyer of Russian oil and gas, but deeper bilateral cooperation in the Arctic has been halting at best. Chinese firms remain sensitive about tripping Western sanctions, and some projects, such as the *Power of Siberia 2* natural gas pipeline from Siberia to northern China, have been beset by logistical delays and policy disagreements. While the Chinese government has not given up on hopes to expand Arctic investments, the country's own economic slowdown, coupled with a more wary diplomatic environment for Beijing amongst Western Arctic governments, reflects a widening gap between Chinese interests and realities.

This does not mean, however, that China poses no challenge to Canadian Arctic interests, but Ottawa should note the limitations of certain aspects of China's polar strategies, including in hard military power and geo-economics, and focus instead on issues of dual use or 'grey zone' operations, including data collection by civilian actors which could be readily transferred for military purposes. The 'balloon incident' in 2023 was an uncomfortable reminder that strategic data collection could potentially take on many forms beyond the obvious avenues. As well, Beijing has been seeking to develop discourse power in the Arctic, including echoing Russian official views that it has been the 'US-led NATO,' not Moscow, which has been responsible for challenging the peaceful order of the Arctic through militarization and containment of Russian interests. Addressing information weaponization in the Arctic is another area which should be incorporated into Canadian Arctic strategies, as part of the countering of disinformation and influence strategies which the Canadian update describes.

*Our North Strong and Free* recognizes the importance of the Arctic for Canadian and North American security, and has sought to address concerns about gaps in proficiencies and threat assessments. However, in addition to providing capital and logistic support to strengthen Canadian Arctic defences, emerging policies should also focus on deepening contacts with, and learning from, Arctic allies, especially in Northern Europe, to better understand the interests, strengths, and restraints of challenger great powers in the far north.

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