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“We are undefended”?

Andrew Leslie, Arctic Defence, and the need for more sophisticated framing

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“Our NATO allies are despairing,” headlined a [13 May 2024 National Post story](#) built around opinions expressed by retired Army commander and former Liberal MP Andrew Leslie. We learn that Leslie has given up on the Liberals and is now advising the “receptive, aware and focused” Conservative team, given the “embarrassing state of Canadian military preparedness” and frustrations expressed by our allies that the Government of Canada is not doing enough in an increasingly turbulent and unpredictable world.

I agree that the government needs to invest more in national defence, including in the Arctic (as articulated in [Canada’s recent defence policy update](#) that Leslie fails to acknowledge). I also hear frustrations from officials in the capitals of our NATO allies that Canada should be doing more. But Leslie’s exhortations, subjected to even modest scrutiny, are problematic.

The story, written by former Alberta Conservative cabinet minister Donna Kennedy-Glans, wants readers to worry because the US general commanding the binational North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), who is double hatted as the commander of US Northern Command, “has put his Canadian counterparts on notice that he aims to have U.S. troops training, not just in Alaska, but in the Canadian Arctic.” This is taken as a signal of Canada’s weakness rather than alliance solidarity.

In fact, Canadian defence policies under both the Conservatives and the Liberals have long sought to encourage multinational preparedness and allied training in the Canadian Arctic, particularly with the [United States as our “premier partner” in the Arctic](#) and elsewhere. Indeed, Leslie must be aware that the Canadian Army he previously commanded has frequently undertaken joint training with its American counterparts (and special forces elements) in the North American Arctic. And certainly no one is suggesting that Canadian

Armed Forces participation in the Alaska-based [Exercise Arctic Edge](#) signifies that the United States is incapable of defending itself without our help. But instead of celebrating efforts to enhance allied militaries' ability to operate effectively together and strengthen situational awareness, Kennedy-Glans chooses to ask whether American training in Canada is "a good idea, or the thin edge of a wedge?"

Thin end of what wedge? Is this the old "[defence against help](#)" argument – that the United States is secretly a threat to Canadian sovereignty? That if we cannot defend ourselves to the satisfaction of the Americans, then they will sweep in and do so regardless of our preferences? Leslie alludes to this when he insists that Canada has "no permanently stationed combat capability in the Arctic," and contrasts this with "22,000 professional men and women in the U.S. Armed Forces based in the Arctic, mainly in Alaska," and "30,000 to 35,000 Russian armed forces based in the Arctic. Canada has about 300 people." Kennedy-Glans says that "the stark facts, articulated by Andrew in a way that leaves no room for doubt, make me wince. It's all so embarrassing." And that is the whole point of her story. They are all strong, and we are weak. "Thank goodness NORAD wants to exercise their American troops in Canada's Arctic," Andrew insists, "someone's got to be out there (in the Arctic) to show presence, and we are not. We are undefended."

Far from "stark facts," these are embarrassing strategic messages for a former senior military officer to be sending to our allies and adversaries alike. The myth of Canada's Arctic being "undefended" is absurd. The *National Post* story is conspicuously silent about the Canada-US relationship in what Leslie simply describes as the "essentially voluntary organization" of NORAD (a bizarre statement) and how this unique binational command arrangement effectively deters would-be adversaries and has defended the Arctic approaches to North America for more than sixty-five years. Furthermore, the idea that Canada does not have anyone in the Arctic to show presence will be highly offensive to Canadians living in the North – and particularly for Indigenous Peoples for whom this has been a homeland since time immemorial. Ironically, he perpetuates [longstanding military difficulties in conceptualizing the Canadian Armed Forces' practical roles and responsibilities with respect to Arctic sovereignty](#).

First, Leslie cites that Canada has only 300 "permanently stationed" military personnel in the North – likely a reference to Joint Task Force (North) headquarters in Yellowknife, with small detachments in Whitehorse and Iqaluit, as well as 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group based in Yellowknife. But why does he summarily dismiss the Canadian Rangers, which would add at least another 2000 Reservists across Inuit Nunangat (the Inuit homeland in Canada) and other parts of the North to his number? Why does he deny military status to Canadians serving in their home communities throughout the Canadian North? Likely because the Rangers do not fit his definition of "combat capable" – a criterion that seems to miss the spirit of the recent Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept which stresses the need for a new operational approach that looks beyond traditional models and integrates across the land, sea, air, space, cyber, and information domains. It

also represents an abrupt change in tone from a 2009 Arctic response planning document where Leslie, as Army commander, lauded the Rangers as “a mature capability” and “the foundation of the CF’s operational capability across the North for a range of domestic missions.”¹ Now, Leslie implies that only conventional soldiers like himself are a real military presence that demonstrates and asserts sovereignty – highly outdated thinking that misses the spirit of “nothing about us, without us” encouraged in the recent [defence policy update](#).

This is a persistent problem in media coverage that seeks to embarrass the Government of Canada by claiming that we have no military presence in the Arctic. As I have argued previously, this [often shows a dismal disregard for the CAF Arctic concept](#) designed to meet the probable defence threats to and in Canada’s Arctic today and in the near-term future. Furthermore, dismissing the Canadian Rangers as a Northern-based Canadian Army Reserve corps, comprised mainly of Indigenous citizens serving in their homelands, could be considered another example of failing to acknowledge and respect the contributions of Northerners to the defence and security of our country. But in Leslie’s view, only “combat-capable” soldiers matter, because only they can defend against ... what? Hoards of Russian land forces streaming through Alaska or over the melting polar ice cap in the Central Arctic Ocean to invade Canada? Really?

Second, Leslie compares the size of the Canadian full-time military establishment in the North to our American and Russian Arctic neighbours. Are the American military personnel based in Alaska primarily to defend that state from a foreign invasion or attack? Or does a simple glance at a globe explain why it makes sense for the United States to base forces in Alaska – given its long extension into the North Pacific – so that they can be projected into the Pacific Theatre? In Canada’s case, similar geographic logic might suggest bolstering our forces based in British Columbia, not the Yukon or Northwest Territories. Canada may soon share a maritime boundary with Russia in the central Arctic Ocean after we sort out our overlapping continental shelf claims, but would having twenty or thirty thousand armed forces stationed in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut provide a deterrent against the kinetic and non-kinetic military threats that Russia could pose? What threats to the Canadian Arctic would they be defending against that are not equally or better deterred through a military presence elsewhere? Leslie and his ilk never explain, apart from relying on the superficial idea that more conventional military “boots on the ground,” garrisoned in the North with the incredibly heavy infrastructure and logistical burden that would entail, means more security.

As for Russia, most of its Arctic military bases are concentrated in Murmansk Oblast and are associated with the Northern Fleet – the maritime leg of Russia’s nuclear triad based on the Kola Peninsula. The Kremlin has also built up its footprint along its Arctic coastline (including Wrangel Island, Cape Schmidt, and Kotelnny Island bases across the Bering Strait from Alaska), asserting that these are homeland defence measures in response to NATO’s increasingly aggressive presence in the region (an ironic mirroring of what we typically argue in

the West). These investments are also rationalized as a way to defend and secure Russia's economic future. Does Leslie really want to militarize the Canadian Arctic akin to Russia's? Does Canada face a similar military threat environment, given our physical geography and our membership in NATO – the most formidable alliance in world history? Perhaps Leslie could sharpen his analysis, beginning with Ernie Regehr's recent accounting of the [military footprint across the Circumpolar Arctic](#), and more clearly rationalize why Canada would want – or need – to follow Russia's lead in stationing such vast numbers of military personnel in the Canadian Arctic.

That stated, Russia and China are authoritarian regimes who seek to revise – or at least disrupt – the global system. I agree with statements that North America should no longer be characterized as a “sanctuary,” and with Leslie's insistence that “deterrence is critical, right now.” He suggests that “Putin and President Xi are both ambitious about the Arctic,” suggesting that while the likelihood of military conflict remains low, “why wouldn't they show up with drilling rigs to challenge Canada's sovereignty in contested areas?” This is a strange statement. Why would Russia show up with a drilling rig in the Canadian Arctic when it has the lion's share of Arctic energy resources within the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation? Arguably, the last thing that Russia – as a competitor – would want to highlight is the resource bounty of Canada's Arctic or the feasibility of the Northwest Passage. And why would China want to send a rig into contested Arctic waters when it can acquire energy from Russia at discount prices? Indeed, if Leslie did his homework he would likely note how the actions of the seven like-minded Arctic states have successfully forced China – which is [a competitor but not a peer in the Arctic](#) – to temper its ambitions in recent years. But that would not fit his alarmist narrative. Indeed, Chinese strategists might love to see Canada [divert and commit massive resources from supporting Western alliance operations in Asia to the North American Arctic](#).

Leslie's logic is also rather tortured with respect to Canada's European allies. First, he treats the [Royal Navy's interest in training and operating in the Canadian Arctic](#) as an indication of a lack of respect, rather than situating it in a more helpful NATO context where Canada also dedicates resources to European defence as its contribution to alliance burden sharing. Leslie also shows his bias by choosing to give credit to the new NORAD commander for seeking to enhance relationships “with Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, other NATO countries with significant landmass inside the Arctic Circle,” when all of Canada's defence and foreign policy statements indicate a similar desire. He then notes that “these countries also have combat capabilities that they *deploy to* their northern climates, on a regular basis, to maintain training and deterrence.” It is odd that Leslie makes no reference to the combat capabilities that the Canadian Armed Forces *deploy to* the Canadian North annually.

He was a former army commander, so he knows about Operation Nanook, about naval and air activities, and training by Regular Force Immediate Response Units, Primary Reserve-generated Arctic Response Company

Groups, and special operation units that deploy north. They might not be adequately trained, equipped, or prepared, but Leslie deliberately avoids any acknowledgement of why Canada has chosen to base its combat elements in southern Canada, which can then be deployed to our North, while applauding our allies for having capabilities that they can “deploy to their northern climates.” This is slippery logic.

And why does he not compare and contrast Canada’s military presence with that of Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark’s [Joint Arctic Command](#), which has geographical responsibility for the 200-nautical mile Faroese Fishery Zone, the Greenlandic Economic Zone, and additional areas in Greenland Search and Rescue Region (SRR), including the strategically vital Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap that connects Russia’s Kola Peninsula to the North Atlantic? How many Danish combat-capable forces are based in Greenland? Leslie has no interest in educating readers on these real comparators because his goal is to sensationalize in hopes that this will shame the Trudeau Liberals into action.

As a close observer of circumpolar geopolitics and an advocate for smart investments in Canadian Arctic defence and security, I remain firmly committed to the importance of having a credible and proportionate national defence and security presence in the region that deters, detects, and can, where necessary, defeat threats [through, to, and in the Canadian Arctic](#). But commentators need to be more precise in our threat assessments and our points of comparison. Nanisivik is not Nome, Mayo is not Murmansk, and Tuktoyaktuk is not Tromsø. Simplistic punditry like Leslie’s leaves me frustrated. Canadians deserve a more sophisticated appraisal of threats and risks through, to, and in our Arctic, and less sensationalizing hyperbole – particularly from a former army commander who should encourage a more robust understanding of the Canadian Armed Forces’ roles and responsibilities in domestic, continental, regional, and international contexts.

Notes

¹ Lt.Gen. A.B. Leslie, “CLS Planning Guidance -- Arctic Response” (July 2009), DND file 3000-1 (A/DLFD).