

MAY 17, 2024

Yesterday Might Have Been Better, But Now Must Do A Response to Rob Huebert on Arctic Sovereignty and Canada's Defence Policy

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In the late 2000s, Franklyn Griffiths christened Rob Huebert as Canada's "primary purveyor of polar peril." For more than two decades, he has been warning that Canada's sovereignty is "[on thinning ice](#)," that the "[return of the Vikings](#)" (the Danes) threatens our sovereignty over Hans Island, that the [Americans are poised to undermine our sovereignty over the Northwest Passage](#), and that we face a "[perfect storm](#)" wherein climate change brings a hostile world to our Arctic doorstep and we cannot stop adversaries from forcing an entry. Based on his alarmist projections two decades ago, Canada should already have been swamped by foreign vessels transiting the Northwest Passage, had our Arctic resources stolen by malign foreign actors, and lost its Arctic sovereignty. None of that has happened, of course, but in Huebert's worldview an Arctic apocalypse is always right around the corner.

Despite the unprecedented Arctic focus in Canada's April 2024 defence policy update, [Our North, Strong and Free](#), Huebert's [latest offering on 1 May 2024](#) insists that it is "too little and too late." We should not be surprised. Go back and read his opinion pieces over the last two decades. Huebert has never been satisfied with anything that any Canadian government has done with respect to the Arctic. I agree with the need for a "generational" investment (as former Minister of National Defence Anita Anand put it in 2022) in military capabilities to support the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) and a range of homeland defence missions, and I even share most of Huebert's concerns about Canada's procurement system and our poor record in implementing defence and Northern policy promises in a timely manner. But if he thinks it is too little and too late, does this mean that he thinks that we should not waste our time or money pursuing the investments promised in the defence policy update?

Huebert imagines a Canadian Arctic in perpetual geopolitical crisis. In my [ongoing debate with him extending back more than a decade](#), I argue that he consistently conflates the concepts of sovereignty and security. He often mixes potential risks and actual threats, and consistently fails to distinguish between [threats through](#),

[to, and in the Canadian Arctic](#). He mixes the past, present, and future, blending speculation with actual evidence, and committing logical fallacies by building arguments on potentialities (“coulds” and “mights”) and then proclaiming certainty about what “will” happen. I crave analytical clarity and precision from someone with such deep knowledge and expertise.

Then there his propensity for faulty parallelism – when the points of comparison do not match. *ONSF* suggests that “the most urgent and important task we face is asserting Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic and northern regions, where the changing physical and geopolitical landscapes have created new threats and vulnerabilities to Canada and Canadians.” In turn, Huebert cites this as “a reversal from the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, which, in 2019, claimed ‘Canada’s sovereignty over the region is longstanding, well-established and based on historic title, and founded in part on the presence of Inuit and First Nations since time immemorial.’” Am I missing something? How does acknowledging the emergence of “new threats and vulnerabilities” somehow negate that our sovereignty is “longstanding, well-established and based on historic title,” and grounded in Indigenous presence? Huebert fails to articulate this important distinction.

Canada’s *sovereignty* is well-established, *and* we face new *security* threats against which we must prepare to defend by using, and enhancing, all our instruments of national power. Huebert’s Arctic sovereignty mindset appears to be built entirely around the military. Mine is a whole-of-society effort in which the Canadian Armed Forces are but one important tool in the proverbial toolbox. [As legal experts in the Government of Canada have been explaining since the late 1960s](#), Arctic sovereignty is not primarily a military problem and Canada does not require an enhanced military “presence” to demonstrate its “effective occupation” of the North. Our Arctic sovereignty is rooted, first and foremost, in the Arctic as a homeland. The challenge remains in discerning specific national defence and security needs in the region, and then allocating responsibilities to the Canadian Armed Forces as part of a coordinated whole-of-government strategy.

Huebert rightly points to Russia and China as competitors. But he is not careful in his characterization of the threats that they represent *to* or *in* the Canadian Arctic across various domains and time horizons. This is significant. As political scientist [Marc Lanteigne explains, we must be careful to properly situate China and Russia in the Arctic](#). The Canadian Arctic is not Ukraine. Russian land forces will not be pouring over the melting polar ice cap to invade us. The Kremlin will continue to use hybrid threats to provoke and intimidate NATO members and may even threaten military action against their Nordic neighbours, but they are not interested in conquering the Canadian Arctic. Moscow would much prefer to have NATO give them a free hand in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation to develop their extensive resources (upon which their economy increasingly depends), operate the Northern Sea Route, and secure access to the North Atlantic for their Northern Fleet. The grand strategic questions of how to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russia as a major nuclear power are better answered by thinking about the threat that they pose to Europe and North America as a whole, not to Canada’s Arctic sovereignty.

As for China, it is a competitor but [should never be elevated to a “peer” in the Arctic](#). Most of the threats that it poses to the Canadian Arctic fall below the threshold of armed conflict. We need to be vigilant to protect

Canadian interests against [predatory economic acquisitions and practices](#), [scientific research as a vector for intelligence gathering](#), balloons, and buoys. Canadians are increasingly awakened to Chinese foreign influence activities, and we should not assume that the Arctic is immune to such dynamics. We must also remember that the Canadian Armed Forces are a *supporting* actor to other national security agencies in addressing these risks, and that militarizing the entire Arctic sovereignty and security agenda would be disruptive and, I would argue, highly counter-productive. Fulfilling the defence update's promise to produce a new national security strategy ([our current one was released in 2004](#)) would help to frame a more holistic approach to security in the Arctic and elsewhere in Canada.

Professor Huebert happens to be one of my closest friends, and I love to debate with him on these issues. But I find his alarmist narratives increasingly out of touch with the security challenges actually facing Canada and its Allies in the Circumpolar North. He has become the quintessential “man who cries wolf” – and it is not his Arctic “sovereignty” wolf that we should be most concerned about. Instead, he should adopt a more sophisticated framing of security that does not conflate or confuse it with sovereignty and is not just about kinetic defence. Doing so might create a more robust foundation for the Government of Canada to rationalize and implement the investment plan outlined in *Our North, Strong and Free*. It is not too late for Canada to provide the Canadian Armed Forces, and other federal departments and agencies, with the tools they need to meet Arctic challenges and compete more effectively in an increasingly turbulent and unpredictable world.