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## A Russian Ukraine-Like Invasion of the Canadian Arctic?

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The story now goes like this. Climate change is melting the Arctic sea ice and making the region more “accessible” to outsiders. The Russians are unpredictable, aggressive, and outright attacking the rules-based international order as evidenced by their unprovoked full invasion of Ukraine. The Russians have military assets in their Arctic, so Canadians are at risk of facing ... a similar invasion? [Adam Zivo’s latest offering in the \*National Post\*](#) is a case in point.

There is so much wrong with this simplistic narrative. Climate change is certainly affecting the Arctic in dramatic ways, but this does not heighten the threat that Russian ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, hyper-glide vehicles and other advanced delivery platforms pose to North America. Most likely scenarios would have strategic weapons pass through the Arctic to strike at higher value targets outside the region. Technological advancements have changed the type and speed of delivery systems, but it is not a fundamentally new threat equation.

What are the threats to the Canadian Arctic? I recently co-hosted an Arctic pan-domain effects workshop with military officials, and I can tell you that Arctic military experts are not worried about a Russian invasion of our homeland. If an adversary launched a military strike at a NORAD forward operating location in the Canadian Arctic or Canadian Forces Station Alert, it would likely be part of a more general conflict and would be intended to disrupt and distract us from primary theatres elsewhere in the world. We need to plan and prepare to defend against such scenarios through investments in Arctic defences, but not because our rivals want to steal our Arctic from us. That is confusing the global drivers of conflict that could spillover into the Arctic with regional dynamics at play in the Arctic itself.

The primary focus of most serious Arctic defence and security analysts is on hybrid threats below the threshold of armed conflict (in the so-called “gray zone”), from cyber and misinformation, to dual-use marine scientific research, to critical infrastructure interference. China is not a military competitor in the Canadian Arctic but its activities pose threats in the economic, scientific, and political spheres. Accordingly, we need to think about how we use all of our instruments of national power, and not just the military, to bolster our northern security and resilience.

While *Our North, Strong and Free*, Canada’s defence policy update released this April, says that asserting Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic and Northern regions is “the most urgent and important task” facing the Canadian Armed Forces, more precise language should have said *security* instead of sovereignty. As I

demonstrate in a recently updated book with Dr. Peter Kikkert, the Canadian military has confused the concepts of Arctic sovereignty and security for fifty years. Fortunately, Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly has promised to release an updated Arctic foreign policy statement this fall. This should help to explain that Canada's Arctic sovereignty is actually well established, and not "tenuous" as pessimistic commentators like Zivo would have us believe.

It is time for Canadian media commentators to step up their game. Canada must support Ukraine and NATO, including defence of the alliance's western and northern flanks, but not because our Arctic sovereignty is threatened. As the defence policy update explains, Canada "will continue playing an important role confronting Russian aggression through a steadfast commitment to NATO assurance and deterrence measures" because "standing with our allies provides the best guarantee of our security and continued prosperity at home." *Our North, Strong and Free* insists that "our Arctic waters, airspace, and territory cannot be vulnerable to intrusion or used as an avenue to harm Canada, our closest ally, the United States, or other NATO allies." I doubt that our Nordic allies are worried that Russia or China are going to use the Canadian Arctic as a vector to threaten them militarily. They have much more serious challenges closer to home. This is about Canada shouldering its weight in defending the northern approaches to North America so that the United States can focus on its role as the guarantor of global security, particularly in Asia and Europe.

Careful readers will note that all of Zivo's scenarios are hypothetical and future-oriented. He calls for investments in the air force, naval, and civilian transportation infrastructure – all of which I support – yet he chooses not to disclose that *Our North, Strong and Free* promises many of these capabilities. Although the commitment to "explore options for renewing and expanding our submarine fleet" to include new "under-ice capable, conventionally powered submarines" remains wishy-washy, once these submarines are actually costed they are likely to push Canada over the 2% of GDP threshold for military spending to which we have committed as a NATO member. I look forward to the day when Canadian representatives can walk into meetings with our allies with Canada having met this minimum obligation.

I agree with Zivo's desired end state – a more capable Canadian Armed Forces that can contribute more fulsomely to the defence of North America and to collective defence. But commentators need to be careful to think through their analogies and avoid drawing false connections when urging the federal government to spend more for Arctic defence. Outlandish narratives of Russian land invasions across the polar ice cap are no foundation upon which to base and sustain a generational investment in Arctic defences. We need to bolster North American defence and security, including in the Arctic, but we need to be credible in identifying the threats and risks – and when and where these are likely to manifest. Superficial understandings of Arctic dynamics and sketchy logic strung together to create a sense of crisis are not helpful if the goal is sustained investment.