

13 December 2023
Ottawa, Ontario

Workshop on Information and Influence Operations and Hybrid Threats in the Arctic

Dr. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Nicholas Glesby

On 13 December 2023, NAADSN hosted a Workshop on Information and Influence Operations and Hybrid Threats in the Arctic in the Québec Boardroom of the Lord Elgin Hotel in Ottawa with scholars and practitioners (including Indigenous experts from Nunavut and the NWT) from Canada, the United States, and Norway. Officials from the Department of National Defence, Global Affairs Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the US Department of State, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Ottawa, the Embassy of Iceland in Ottawa were in attendance.

Hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns have become central pillars of the evolving Russian and Chinese approach to waging twenty-first century conflict. While conventional military action against other Arctic states remains unlikely, competitors seek to exploit divisions amongst and within the like-minded Arctic states through concerted disinformation campaigns designed to polarize populations and exacerbate tensions.

This workshop discussed disinformation, societal trust, and resilience in an Arctic context. Topics (all discussed in an unclassified setting) included Norwegian and Canadian assessments of hybrid threats from Russia and China, actual or potential adversarial activities in the information and influence domains, and policies and best practices to prepare for, combat against, and build resilience towards disinformation and malign influence. This NAADSN Activity Report provides a summary of topics discussed and lessons learned for future knowledge sharing in the Norway-Canada relationship. Beyond the overall workshop introduction and keynote address summaries, the Chatham House rule of non-attribution was in effect and is reflected in this report.

Representation and Sessions

Opening Remarks

Dr. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Dr. Marc Lanteigne

NAADSN Lead and NAADSN Coordinator

Morning Keynote Discussion

Dr. Tobias Etzold

Senior Research Fellow, Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt – Norwegian institute of International Affairs (NUPI)

Session 1: Assessments of Hybrid Threats from Russia and China

Dr. Sergey Sukhankin

NAADSN Postdoctoral Fellow

Dr. Bjørn Gunnar Isaksen

Head of Research, Norwegian Defence Command and Staff College

Session 2: Adversarial Activities in the Information and Influence Domains

Dr. Andrew Bresnahan

NAADSN Coordinator

Dr. Adam Lajeunesse

NAADSN Coordinator

Afternoon Keynote Discussion

Dr. Marc Lanteigne

NAADSN Coordinator

Session 3: Policies and Best Practices

Dr. Andrea Charron

NAADSN Co-Lead

Dr. Paal Sigurd Hilde

Professor, Norwegian institute for Defence Studies

Roundtable Reflections and Wrap Up

Dr. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Dr. Bjørn Gunnar Isaksen

MINDS Policy Challenges

The [MINDS Policy Challenges](#) reflect the key issues facing the Defence Team and represent potential areas for knowledge transfer and collaboration with the defence and security expert community. Participants discussed the following challenges during the activity:

- Identifying opportunities for operational and strategic collaboration with like-minded Arctic allies and partners, both within and outside of existing structures and frameworks.
- What are Canada's and Norway's roles as a middle power? What should these roles look like over the next 5-10 years?
- How can DND/CAF and the Norwegian Armed Forces best support Ukraine and European defence, security and stability while considering competing domestic priorities like support to climate change related emergencies?
- What is Canada's contribution to a balanced Western and NATO approach towards Russia that is rooted in the rules-based international order?
- What strategies of contestation are likely to deter Russia's aggression and significantly reduce the threat from Russia?
- Assessing how the evolving character of war will impact the strategic environment across all domains. How should our militaries adapt?
- Understanding risks and opportunities in defining burden sharing, and reconceptualizing Canadian, Norwegian, and NATO approaches to it.
- Enhancing understanding of the diverse needs and perspectives of regional partners given intensifying strategic competition between the US and China, and China's increasing use of below threshold tactics.
- How can Canada and Norway respond, alongside allies and partners, to China's challenges to the rules-based international order.
- How can Canada alongside allies and partners best leverage our national advantages to better compete with China?
- Engaging with competitors in the Arctic and balancing considerations for engagement with the need to detect, deter, and defend against threats.
- Exploring military roles in advancing whole-of-government priorities in the North, including with respect to collaboration with other government departments.

Opening Remarks

Canada's defence policy [Strong, Secure, Engaged](#) (2017) describes the Arctic as an "important international crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade and global security meet." Canada commits to increase its military presence in the region and to work cooperatively with partners. [The Government of Norway's Arctic Policy](#) (2021) places a similarly high priority on partnering with allies to realize its Arctic and High North policy goals centred on security, stability, and interest-based cooperation.

On 12 December 2023, NAADSN and the Royal Norwegian Embassy co-hosted the inaugural Gauntlet Seminar in Ottawa. Canadian, Norwegian, and American scholars and practitioners shared their insights on Canadian Arctic defence investments, differences in threat perception, a more Nordic-oriented NATO, shared vulnerabilities, and opportunities for policy alignment. What lessons can allies learn and apply from diverse experiences in a time of intensifying great power rivalry? Does hybrid warfare heighten the risk of conflict escalation? A previous [NAADSN activity report on the Gauntlet Seminar](#) provides a summary of topics discussed and lessons learned for future knowledge sharing in the Norway-Canada relationship and future seminars.

In his introductory remarks, Dr. Whitney Lackenbauer, the network lead of NAADSN, highlighted the recent internal Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) [Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept: Prevailing in an Uncertain World](#), which outlines a more chaotic global security environment. Our adversaries are actively building capabilities to challenge us across multiple domains, and spillover of global competition into the Arctic has become a growing concern since Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russian aggression also had an immediate impact on [Norway's military and security priorities](#), and the Arctic represents what [Canada's 2017 defence policy](#) described as "an important international crossroads" for many issue areas that are shared priorities across NATO and the seven like-minded Arctic states (Canada, Denmark via the Kingdom of Greenland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States).

As allies, Norway and Canada are facing a more serious threat environment now than they have in decades, with the Arctic returning as a stage for great power rivalry. Although Russia's military conduct in the north has been restrained, its distrust of the West and of allied military activities in the Arctic could alter Russian military behaviour in areas close to Norway. This increases the risk of misunderstandings, accidents and escalation, particularly with fewer bilateral points of contact between the countries. This means that the Kremlin relies more on its intelligence and security services to access information about Western affairs. Defending the northern bastion and having access to the North Atlantic are vital to Russia's concept of security, and Russia wants to project the message that it is the dominant power in the Arctic. Concurrently, Moscow considers its position in the region to be more vulnerable than before, and it is actively involved in influence operations as part of its approach to information warfare. Public debates on defence and security policies, Arctic policies, energy and environmental policies, and Western attitudes with respect to the war in Ukraine are particularly vulnerable to influence activity, with Russia promoting narratives that the West has compromised the security situation in the Nordic region.

China does not constitute a direct military threat to Canada or Norway at this time, but it seeks to establish a political and economic foothold in the Arctic (which could be used as the basis for military activities in the future).

China's investments in polar capabilities, including icebreakers, allow the country to operate more independently and [normalize its presence](#) in the region. Dr. Marc Lanteigne of Norway's Arctic University (UiT) noted that much of China's attention in the last few years has focused on the Northern Sea Route (NSR), but Chinese actors have shown an interest in developing related infrastructure in Norway as well. Thus far, China has not conducted any military operations in the Canadian or High North European regions but developing the ability to carry these out (particularly in the maritime domain) is likely one of the country's long-term goals. Beijing uses Chinese businesses and individuals for government purposes, with Chinese companies and individuals who have legal obligations to assist China's intelligence and security services, and Beijing's military-civil fusion strategy blurs the lines between these realms.

While most Canadian and Norwegian Arctic security experts assess that we are unlikely to see overt kinetic military conflict in the Arctic region, hybrid provocations in the "grey zone" regularly occur within the competitive continuum between peace and war and below the threshold of armed conflict. Norwegian analysts note a recent increase in hybrid threat activities in the Norwegian High North, most of which are either attributed to Russia or suspected to originate from Russia. The targets are often civilian, including political leaders, critical infrastructure, and targets of high economic value which can be influenced or attacked through political influence, information warfare, cyber operations, sabotage, infiltration, disruption of energy supply, and border infringements. These threats are often designed to sow seeds of mistrust, destabilize society, and influence power dynamics. Given the geopolitical context in which we now find ourselves, we need deeper and broader information sharing and collaboration amongst allied defence teams – which, in the Canadian conceptualization, includes not only serving military members and civil servants, but academics and other experts as well.

The workshop was structured to be highly interactive, with few formal presentations and lots of discussion. Participants were asked to keep their comments brief and focused on policy-relevant analysis (i.e. the "so, what?") so that the group could explore and consider how Canada and Norway can share best practices, knowledge, tools, and understandings of common problems. Given that this was the first occasion bringing together this group of Canadian and Norwegian experts, participants were also encouraged to formulate key questions that could serve as a basis for subsequent collaborative research.

Morning Keynote Discussion

Climate Change in the Arctic: Security Implications and Consequences for Military Operations

Dr. Tobias Etzold introduced the CLIMARSEC project funded by the US Joint Staff J-7-led Multinational Capability Development Campaign (MCDC). The two-year project brings together 23 nations and international organizations to research and study non-materiel solutions to multinational force (MNF) operations and exercises by solving and mitigating common military problems. Led by the Norwegian Ministry of Defense and Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), CLIMARSEC examines the "current challenges to the military operating environment caused by climate change and competitive activity in the Arctic and how existing gaps in operational capability and governance of Multinational Forces could be closed and future capability

requirements be met.”¹ To meet future capability requirements, the project addresses governance and capability gaps by focusing on command, control, communication, and coordination capabilities necessary for Arctic operations.

Hybrid threats can either follow or are an implication of climate change due to increased geographical access, such as fisheries and maritime vessels for multiple purposes. Rising temperatures result in reductions of sea ice, permafrost thawing, and extreme weather conditions. Thawing permafrost can undermine military infrastructure, such as ports, runways, undersea cabling, or hangars, making operations more difficult. Etzold suggested that climate change is currently not the main driver of emerging geopolitical tensions in the Arctic and beyond, rather it acts as a threat multiplier by increasing the challenge of hypothetical military operations should conflict spill over.

CLIMARCSEC is based on the idea that an Arctic becoming more accessible due to climate change creates conditions for competition at a pace that challenges and stresses existing governance structures and national military capabilities. Global warming and increasing strategic competition make the prospect of military operations in the Arctic both more likely and more difficult. These factors increase the need for stronger situational awareness for MNF operational capabilities, governance and coordination, and policy changes.

The Arctic is an important strategic theatre for international actors but is austere and difficult in which to operate. The project’s guiding questions include “what are the current challenges to military operating environments cause by climate change and competitive activity in the Arctic?” and “how can existing gaps in operational capability and governance (including coordination) of MNF operations be closed?”

CLIMARSEC will further contribute to the implementation of effective military activities in the Arctic by assisting with developing plans for multinational forces and headquarters to better prepare for a changing environment. These combined forces also need the ability to develop and apply customized policies, procedures, technologies, and up-to-date operational concepts for operating in an environment they may have limited experience with. Considerations going forward include more awareness and a better understanding of the vague problem of climate change’s impact on security and military operations, adaption to new requirements and new operating environments, greater cooperation and coordination, and a more pronounced role for NATO in the Arctic.²

Session 1: Assessment of Hybrid Threats from Russia and China

- The concept of “hybrid threats” remains contested, and there is no unified definition. Recent studies include a range of cyber, infrastructure, espionage, and information/influence activities under this concept.
- The idea that Russia has been “playing by the rules” in the Arctic is incorrect, given its hybrid activities. Russian experts always claim that a war in the Arctic will not be a conventional one (akin to the war in Ukraine) but will take a different shape.
- Russia’s worldview sees a strategic nexus between the Baltic and Arctic regions. According to Russian military thinking, the High North and the Baltic Sea constitute a continuous area. NATO enlargement has

undermined one of Russia's primary goals: to preserve the Baltic region as a geographic and political buffer against the alliance. This, in turn, reduces Russia's military freedom of action in the region.

- Russia's remilitarization of the Arctic did not start after "Euromaiden" (the large-scale protests that began in November 2013 in response to Ukrainian President Yanukovich's decision not to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union and instead pursuing closer ties to Russia) but well before.
- In the intelligence sphere, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) had been using [the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North \(RAIPON\)](#) to infiltrate and collect information from Indigenous Peoples in Canada and other Arctic states. The Russian Federation has long used Indigenous channels and academic exchanges to gather information, which fits with the Russian "playbook."
- Russia's crackdown on environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who previously exposed hundreds of environmental disasters in the Russian Arctic, has effectively silenced those groups as a source of information. While Russia regularly accuses the West of destroying the Arctic environment, it is not doing much if anything to mitigate climate change, permafrost degradation, or forest fires.
- Do Canada and Norway share a common threat perception? Do the seven like-minded Arctic states have a common operating picture? Can we build the architecture here, because of the sophistication and expertise of who is involved, and then carry it to other areas?
- NATO is developing a common picture on resilience, grounded in national self-reporting. Can NATO create a "hybrid scoreboard" of sorts?
- Is the Arctic particularly susceptible to hybrid threats? If yes, why? If not, why? Participants discussed how the threats are often driven by global dynamics that manifest locally. They also distinguished between two different existential threats: climate change (which leads some commentators to lobby for a reactivation of engagement with Russia in the Arctic Council) and geopolitics (with Russia using active measures to undermine the West). The danger is setting up a zero-sum game with investments that address one existential threat precluding those in the other. Have the Russians confounded our ability to manage these two existential threats?
- In order to avoid "unforced errors," we need to adopt multivariate analysis in our assessments of competition. What other variables matter? For example, while political statements often highlight how climate change is "opening the Arctic" (with thought directed at the maritime domain), does it facilitate "access" in the land domain? How do we avoid spending money on the wrong capabilities, or investing in the wrong projects? The encouragement to do so might come from malign actors, but we can also make bad choices on our own.
- Hybrid threats are global. How significant area they in the Arctic? What are priorities for resource allocation, and who loses if we redirect resources towards the Arctic?

- Can we agree on clear anomalies that deviate from a “normal pattern of life” in the Arctic?
- What do we think that we can achieve through “militarization” of the Arctic agenda? Are we clear and consistent in our messaging?

Session 2: Adversarial Activities in the Information and Influence Domains

- While Russia and China both challenge the existing global order, Russia constitutes a close and potentially direct and immediate military threat (particularly in Norway’s case), whereas China represents a more distant, indirect, and systemic challenge to the rules-based international order.
- The Arctic is strategically important to both Russia and China, but in different ways. How do we infer adversarial intent? How do their practices, tactics, and priorities differ in Arctic jurisdictions from elsewhere? How do we measure the impact or success of these activities?
- Sun Tzu wrote: “know thy self, know they enemy, and you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.” How well do we know ourselves? Our partners? Our fault lines? Our adversaries?
- We need to carefully measure the effectiveness and impact of information operations, and particularly narratives, over time. Russia used to try to influence Norwegians living in both the northern and southern parts of the country using history as a key strategic tool in [memorial diplomacy](#), but these efforts are now proving less effective. The same is true of the PRC following the debate over 5G telecommunications systems in Europe.
- Russia’s goal is to destabilize, polarize, and encourage divisive, self-destructive debates within and amongst Western countries. This is primarily accomplished by amplifying or skewing existing debates rather than creating new ones.
- China’s primary goal in the information domain has been to shape a favourable narrative of the PRC to both facilitate access for Chinese actors (including companies) and to “teach” or chastise countries that deviate from preferred Chinese messaging.
- Russian intelligence services have been mapping out Norwegian targets (both digital and physical) for years, and seek to gather information about Norwegian politics, energy, the High North, allied activities, and defence using various means. It is less clear how much similar information they have about Canadian targets, particularly in the Arctic.
- The Government of Canada is consulting and collaborating with Northern Indigenous populations to build trust, share information, and buttress against malign actors seeking to foment mistrust and exploit them. This includes efforts to reassure Northern populations that their interests and security are of primary concern to the government. The effectiveness of these orchestrated campaigns may be limited, however, owing to Canadians’ low levels of trust in politicians and political institutions. It is important to

note that trust and resilience is not the same across the different like-minded Arctic states, and that solutions in one country or region may not work in another.

- Is the image of Russia and China as all-controlling and prescient overly inflated? Is it overly conspiratorial and paranoid?
- Soviet-era “active measures” help to explain some of the Russian Federation’s recent behaviour, but Russian society is not the same as it was during the Cold War. The West faces a danger of “outsmarting” itself by not acknowledging fractures within Russian society, including deep-seated economic woes. The Western allies must avoid promoting Kremlin narratives that serve Russian interests and not the West’s.
- Canada’s adversaries are using divisive narratives with respect to Indigenous-Crown relations (such as residential schools, dog slaughters, and forced relocations) to drive wedges between Canadians. While grappling with these narratives is part of the Canadian process of reconciliation, how can the Government of Canada ensure that malign foreign actors are not exacerbating domestic political tensions? Solutions must build on the strengths and resilience of Indigenous Peoples, seeing them not as a vulnerability but a source of opportunity. Furthermore, Canada’s Northern governance system is so complex that Northerners can likely discern when outside voices seeking to sway opinion do not understand or resemble local debates.
- To counter Chinese messaging suggesting that the seven like-minded Arctic states have shifted to singular narratives that seek to “militarize” the region, there may be a value in nuanced narratives that illustrate the complexity of security across various sectors.
- The essence of Western democracy lies in the absence of a single political voice. In a world of increasing polarization of debates, we must be careful to not vilify or simply cancel voices within our society that do not conform with our own. We must preserve and protect spaces for democratic discussions on our own terms, and ensure that these are not being unduly shaped or influenced by adversarial actors. Conversely, how can the Western allies exploit gaps and seams amongst our adversaries through narrative competition in the information domain?

Afternoon Keynote Discussion

China and the Arctic

Dr. Marc Lanteigne, the foremost expert on China and the Arctic, delivered the afternoon keynote address. He laid out China’s initial conceptualization of its role as a “near-Arctic state,” Beijing’s adoption of its Arctic policy in 2018, and subsequent retrenchment after economic projects failed to materialize and concern over backlash of alignment with Russia following its illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

It is widely understood that China wants to be an Arctic stakeholder, contributing to Arctic governance, economic, and political decisions in international forums. The concept of China as a “near-Arctic state” first emerged as an academic concept in and around 2010. During this time, the Arctic Council was gaining visibility

as a governance forum which was worth China paying attention to. A driving idea was that, due to climate change, there would be a global scramble for economic resources with an ice-free and navigable Arctic. China's decision to label itself as a "near-Arctic state" was reactive, created to gather data and knowledge to better understand the local politics, economics, and governance structure. This would, in theory, show that China was serious about Arctic affairs and deserved a seat in decision-making forums. A pillar of China's thought process was that it could say that they are not an Arctic state, but that the region has a direct impact on their interests, going so far as to identify the Arctic as a "new strategic frontier."

China's "near-Arctic state" concept has been misinterpreted in many ways. For example, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's 2019 Rovaniemi speech at the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting depicted it as a "smoking gun" revealing China's aggressive, revisionist intentions.³ Lanteigne explained that Chinese commentators have largely stopped referencing this concept, and that it is Western commentators who continue to keep it in circulation.

China's desire to be a "polar great power" also is open to interpretation, given the literal translation of power is force and capability. Beijing's [2018 Arctic policy](#) highlighted multinational cooperation as an "effective means" to establish a "relationship of multi-level, omni-dimensional, and wide ranging participation in Arctic affairs." Lanteigne mentioned that Beijing continues to gather knowledge, data, and experience so that it can walk into Arctic policy conversations and have an equal footing. However, even with an emphasis on cooperation, Chinese policy makers have stated that Arctic Council governance structures are insufficient for non-Arctic states to have a voice at the table (of course, this is by design so that Indigenous permanent participants are included). China wants to overturn established rules and norms to suit their own interests.

In the last few years, China's Arctic ambitions have been in retrenchment. Three concerns have caused this pullback. First, Beijing's fear that the "melon" effect would see the Arctic pieced into eight sections controlled by each of the Arctic states, with the untapped natural resources and economic windfalls only flowing to those with regional physical presence. To counter this, Beijing's Polar Silk Road (PRS) was sold as an economic policy for regional benefit using China's engineering and infrastructure expertise and financial capital. However, the like-minded seven Arctic states (Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark via Greenland, Iceland, Finland, Sweden, and Norway) saw the PRS as a revisionist attempt at collecting economic power.

Second, the PRS, as an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) throughout Europe, Central Asia, and Africa, has been continuously delayed or scrapped due to overambitious and unviable investment plans. Projects such as a gold mine purchase in Nunavut, a rail link between northern Finland and Norway, or an underwater Arctic communications conduit along the Northern Sea Route (NSR) have never materialized.⁴ These failures have forced China to re-examine its Arctic objectives, withdrawing from ambitious policy decisions to re-calculate its approach.

Third, an additional worry for Beijing is a militarized Arctic. This would create massive disadvantages in its pursuit to extract economic profit and exert regional influence. China has been perpetuating the incorrect narrative that the sole responsibility of fears over conflict in the Arctic is the fault of NATO and the United States, who drag the NATO members in against their free will and create regional instability, blocking "positive" Chinese

policy changes. The aligned Arctic states need to counter this perceived zero-sum idea by focusing on the human security element, rather than on an arms race to match capabilities, so that China cannot exploit it to their benefit.

Alongside concerns about a militarized Arctic, there is also skepticism in the China-Russia Arctic relationship. The joint ‘no limits’ partnership agreed to by Putin and Xi just before Russia’s brutal further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 promised future bilateral Arctic activities.⁵ However, the China-Russia relationship is a “thin veneer with little established trust beyond mutual affirmations of goodwill.” China is worried about a declining and chaotic Russia cutting off Arctic access, should they become overdependent on Moscow. On the other hand, Russia likely worries that an ice-free Central Arctic Ocean would mean China could act unilaterally without assistance. Additionally, China does not want to be seen as a vocal support of Russia’s in Ukraine, which could lead to decreased trade opportunities and Western sanctions.

As part of China’s defensive retrenchment away from the Arctic policy space, it has reverted to prioritizing scientific diplomacy. Arctic scholarship in China continues to have low up-take, and hard sciences are still preferred over the social sciences and humanities. By returning to cooperatively engage in scientific activities, the Chinese line is that it is contributing to a global effort to combat and learn more about climate change - and that neither they nor Russia can be left out of the discussion. However, Beijing’s counter-espionage law that declares any piece of information can be designated as a national security concern is further limiting scientists’ ability to conduct and disseminate their research with partners in Arctic states. The bifurcation of Arctic research and communication means that Western scientists are hesitant to share their research data without it becoming restricted for government use. Alternative forms of cooperation and data sharing such as Track II dialogues (i.e. informal contacts between groups or individuals) only allow for so much collaboration before higher-level information becomes a security concern.

China’s “near-Arctic state” ambitions were conceptualized as an academic construct in 2010, before becoming official policy in 2018. A Polar Silk Road with far less impact than originally predicted, concerns about the “melon” effect, and risks of being closely associated with Russia following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have led China to retrench itself and reconsider its options to achieve its objectives in the Arctic. With the goal of creating economic advantages and exerting regional influence, Beijing has reverted to scientific diplomacy as it seeks to control an anti-Western narrative about NATO’s influence in the region. Ultimately, China wants to be respected as a legitimate Arctic actor and has started to hint that it may circumvent the Arctic Council and assume its responsibilities to maintain regional “peace” relative to its role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.⁶

Session 3: Arctic Messaging, Policies, and Best Practice

The session began with a reflection about the messages associated with NATO Arctic exercises. Traditionally, “Norwegian defence and security policy is NATO” and about how much to restrict the Allied presence in Norway to reassure Russia that the country will not be a springboard for invasion. This logic is now challenged given the scope and brutality of Russia’s war in Ukraine, which ended the post-Cold War era and reveals a blatant disregard for sovereignty and the existing international order. While Canada was reticent to have NATO adopt

an explicit Arctic role in the late 2000s and early 2010s, this official position has changed. *Strong, Secure, Engaged* highlighted that “NATO has also increased its attention to Russia’s ability to project force from its Arctic territory into the North Atlantic, and its potential to challenge NATO’s collective defence posture.” The policy makes clear that “Canada and its NATO Allies have been clear that the Alliance will be ready to deter and defend against any potential threats, including against sea lines of communication and maritime approaches to Allied territory in the North Atlantic.” Alongside Canada’s commitment to “support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO,” this indicates a closer alignment with Norway on NATO than existed previously.

- We need clearer domestic messaging in Canada about how NATO fits within our conceptualization of North American defence, including the Arctic, as well as our obligations to collective defence across the North Atlantic world. Despite the political appetite in Canada to wrap everything associated with Arctic defence and security as assertions of our “sovereignty,” this can be counterproductive if one of our keys goals is to demonstrate our commitments to collective defence amongst allies. Continuously emphasizing our vulnerabilities in terms of Arctic sovereignty not only signals a self-perception of weakness, it also tends to detract from more substantive risks and threats across the security spectrum that are not related to adversaries contesting our *right* to control activities within Canadian jurisdiction.
- Canada should invite NATO allies to participate in its Operation NANOOK series exercises because this demonstrates our sovereignty and this is an opportunity to exercise interoperability. Narratives should clarify the link between the North Atlantic connecting the North American Arctic allies and their Nordic counterparts. (The North Pacific other offers a way to connect Asian and Arctic narratives.)
- Exercises are a critical component of operational-level defence collaboration, and are key to developing the skills needed to operate effectively in the Arctic, enhance capabilities, and identify capability gaps. Equally significant, exercises are political signals – forms of strategic messaging. The way in which an exercise is constructed and conducted influences participants, governments, public audiences, and potential adversaries. Do we actually know what we are exercising? What are we messaging strategically (both domestically and to adversaries)?¹
- Canada and Norway have an opportunity to showcase their expertise in terms of constructing, conducting, and disseminating strategic messaging around [national, bilateral, trilateral, and NATO exercises](#). This would help to address what is currently a disparate process across and between allies.
- NORDIC RESPONSE 2024 will be the first showcasing Sweden and Finland as full integrated members of the alliance. This provides an opportunity to reinforce messaging of how the West is performing as a coherent, unified bloc.
- We need more accurate and realistic assessments of whether our strategic messaging around exercises, military statements, and other activities resonate with their intended audiences.

¹ A Norwegian participant suggested that this is a “Canadian problem,” and that Norway has clarity in this respect.

- Many myths and misconceptions about so-called threats to Canadian sovereignty stem from a mistaken conflation of sovereignty and defence/security. Canadian officials should not broadcast to the world that our “sovereignty” is in question or increasingly vulnerable when it is well-established. Well-managed disagreements with the United States on the status of waters which Canada considers to be internal (subject to our full sovereignty) should not be confused with rival claims of ownership. Canadian officials would be well advised to focus on clearly situating defence and security [threats through, to, and in the Arctic](#), and should avoid confusing these with alleged “Arctic sovereignty” threats that cannot be countered through a regional military “presence.”
- There is a growing body of academic and think tank literature on Svalbard and security in which myths and misconceptions abound. Svalbard is Norwegian sovereignty territory, and Norwegian laws and regulations apply there. NATO’s collective security guarantees also apply to Svalbard, and it is not a “demilitarized” zone (with the Svalbard Treaty stipulating that the archipelago cannot be used for war purposes and Norway establish military bases there). Clear Norwegian messaging is needed to counteract these misconceptions, and raising awareness amongst allies including Canada can help in this respect.
- Since February 2022, Russian authorities have indicated that they intend to amplify their presence on Svalbard for both symbolic and strategic reasons. Russia is the only country other than Norway to have settlements on Svalbard, and it sees the archipelago as a place to assert its strength because Russian citizens are allowed to reside and conduct business activities there pursuant to the Svalbard Treaty. Various nationalistic activities around Barentsburg and Pyramiden warrant concern but do not threaten Norwegian sovereignty. Russia has a continued interest in maintaining its presence and activity on Svalbard and a stated ambition to set up an international research and education centre at the former Soviet coal mining settlement Pyramiden. Russia has made overtures suggesting that it wishes to cooperate more with non-Arctic states (particularly BRICS and BRICS+) on Svalbard.
- China has not challenged Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard, but it has a growing scientific interest in the archipelago and is concerned about its rights and interests there. The Chinese research community has accused Norway of reaching too far in terms of coordinating scientific activities. For its part, Norway has told Chinese researchers to publish their findings in English if they are sincere about wanting to promote narratives about the importance of climate change and international cooperation. The mantra of “make common science common” applies here.
- China poses a challenge to Canadian and Norwegian Arctic interests, but Ottawa and Oslo should note the limitations of certain aspects of China’s polar strategies, including in hard military power and geo-economics, and should focus instead on issues around ‘dual-use’ infrastructure or ‘grey zone’ operations, including data collection by civilian actors which could be readily transferred for military purposes. The North American ‘balloon incident’ earlier this year was an uncomfortable reminder that strategic data collection can take many forms beyond the obvious avenues.
- 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 and Norwegian Arctic strategies, as part of their broader efforts to counter disinformation and malign foreign influence.

- All too often, Western commentators tend to echo Beijing’s own narrative about China’s Arctic presence and profile, thus mischaracterizing China as a peer or near-peer competitor in the Arctic. Overstating the scale of Chinese investment and other forms of engagement in the Arctic overinflates the importance of China as a regional actor. Since 2017, almost all of China’s planned Arctic investments outside of Russia have either stalled or failed – a fact that is seldom reflected in Western Arctic policy statements or threat assessments. China’s push into the Arctic has met far more resistance from the seven like-minded Arctic states, and its presence remains far more tenuous, than Beijing advertises. Why are Canada and Norway not touting the Arctic as a region where they remain vigilant but have successfully managed to check China’s regional ambitions?
- What can Canada do for Norway? Norwegian participants noted that Canada is perceived as a good partner with respect to foreign policy (including alignments on human security and the women, peace and security agenda), and while there is limited contact in the defence field the two countries’ intelligence services work together closely. Other ideas included Canada providing more support to [NATO Joint Force Command – Norfolk](#), leading alliance discussion on climate security through the new NATO Centre of Excellence on Climate and Security (CASCOE) based in Montreal, and collaborating more closely with the NATO Centre of Excellence on Cold Weather Operations based in Norway. Participants also saw opportunities for enhanced research cooperation and leadership between Norwegian and Canadian experts.
- Today, there is a broad policy consensus in Russia about the desirability of keeping Sino-Russian relations on a positive trajectory in political and economic terms. Chinese statements—and tacit acceptance of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—suggest that Beijing also sees strategic value in continuing to strengthen that relationship. This confluence of interest creates obvious dangers for the democratic Arctic states. Although downplayed by the Russian and Chinese governments and Arctic actors in those countries, [areas of friction](#) over navigation, resource exploitation, and infrastructure represent exploitable gaps in the relationship. Western observers and commentators should not be neutral in observing this relationship, and benefit from highlighting issues that Beijing and Moscow wish to sidestep. This will better position the like-minded Arctic states to address Russia and China as distinct regional challenges rather than an inherently unified front.
- Historical insights and “lessons learned” should play a more direct role in informing current policy and practice. There is a tendency to “over-complicate the past and over-simplify the present” in presenting assertions that we face “unprecedented times.” What practices should we adopt to improve how lessons and best practices are observed and subsequently collected, analyzed, disseminated, and translated into lessons learned across the diverse network responsible for Arctic security?
- Arctic commentators need to bring additional rigour to their estimative analysis and apply a more explicit framework for handling uncertainty. What is the basis for particular analysts and commentators claiming

“expertise,” and what responsibility do these experts bear with respect to how they make estimates or predictions?

Final Take-Aways

Participants were asked to share their final thoughts on what they considered to be key take-away points, themes, or ideas. These included the following:

- The different opinions, assessments, and even disagreements between experts at the meeting showed that ongoing discussion, animated by a similar spirit of openness and respect for viewpoint diversity, is required. Participants embraced the opportunity to test official (and one another’s) assumptions in a constructive and safe atmosphere. One participant suggested that frank academic-practitioner exchanges like this affirm the competitive advantages that we enjoy in our democracies compared to our autocratic competitors and adversaries.
- Both Canadian and Norwegian experts expressed how much they learned from one another, and how the discussions helped to both reveal and explain complexity and nuance in both countries’ defence and security policies, their understanding of pan-domain threats, and their structures and capabilities to address a changing security environment.
- Misconceptions about China’s actual Arctic footprint should be corrected, and analysts should acknowledge significant shifts in Beijing’s far northern policies (as well as China’s overall reduced presence in the region outside of Russia) in recent years. Without doing so, they run the risk of both propagating Beijing’s desired messaging and of focusing on the wrong threats and vulnerabilities across various sectors of security. The Arctic states are the peers in the Arctic strategic equation, and messaging should affirm that Beijing remains firmly in the second tier of Arctic stakeholders—and competitors.
- The Sino-Russian relationship is more fragile than it might appear based on news media and think tank characterizations of an emerging Arctic “alliance” between the two autocratic powers. Despite lofty declarations of mutual interests in the Arctic, there have been significant cracks in this regional relationship.
- Are we clear on what we, as allies, actually expect and want from Russia in an Arctic context? Is it simply for Russia to respect our sovereignty and stay within its Arctic borders?
- The discussions highlighted the importance of understanding messaging as an action-reaction dynamic that plays out over time.
- Conversations affirmed the value of academic-policy practitioner interaction and the exchange of ideas, as well as engagement across the Whole-of-Government team (as Arctic security conversations tend to engage with defence officials and not other departments or agencies with security mandates and authorities). There is ample opportunity for comparative discussions between Norwegian and Canadian

experts on how their countries are and should instrumentalize Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society approaches.

- Engaging with a diverse group of experts in an unclassified setting is helpful to civil servants when it comes to informing senior executives on how they should focus their messaging for the public audiences.
- Enhanced collaboration between Norwegian and Canadian experts will help to elucidate how different actors view the Arctic (and each other in the Arctic) and generate practical solutions to deepen and broaden our cooperation both inside and beyond NATO.

Notes

¹ LCdr Will D. Spoon and Tobias Etzold, “The Joint Chiefs of Staff Look North: Security Implications and Military Consequences of Climate Change in the Arctic,” *Wilson Center*, 26 January 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/no-23-joint-chiefs-staff-look-north-security-implications-and-military-consequences>.

² Tobias Etzold and Gine Rønne Bolling, “Climate change in the Arctic: Security implications and consequences for military operations – a MCDC project,” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.nupi.no/en/projects-centers/climate-change-in-the-arctic-security-implications-and-consequences-for-military-operations-a-mcdc-project>.

³ On the reaction to Pompeo’s remarks, see Arne O. Holm, “Arctic Council Tensions Run High: Verbal Thunderstorm From Mike Pompeo,” 7 May 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/verbal-thunderstorm-mike-pompeo>.

⁴ Marc Lanteigne, “The Rise (and Fall?) of the Polar Silk Road,” *The Diplomat*, 29 August 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-polar-silk-road/>.

⁵ President of Russia, “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” *The Kremlin*, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

⁶ For reaction to Chinese Ambassador Gao Feng’s remarks, see: P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Arctic Circle Assembly 2022,” *NAADSN Activity Report*, October 2022, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/22-oct-13-16-Activity-Report-PWL-ArcticCircleAssembly2022.pdf>.