

# STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES



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## The Defence Policy Update and NATO's Northern Flank: Insights from Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent's 1947 Gray Lecture

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Canada's 2017 defence white paper *Strong, Secured, Engaged (SSE)* noted that "NATO has...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."<sup>1</sup> Since that time, a series of NATO exercises off the coast of Norway<sup>2</sup> and the standing up of new commands<sup>3</sup> in support of Alliance efforts have reinvigorated attentiveness to NATO's Northern Flank. The sea lines of communication (SLOCs) linking North America to Europe are central to this concept,<sup>4</sup> with the North Atlantic linking the defence of Canada and the Arctic – Our North – with NATO.

While *SSE* specifically framed the North Atlantic as a geostrategic centre of gravity,<sup>5</sup> it is missing from Canada's April 2024 defence policy update, *Our North, Strong and Free (ONSF)*.<sup>6</sup> The latter instead focuses on the second concept of what constitutes NATO's Northern Flank: the Arctic.<sup>7</sup> The document is rife with concern about "asserting," "defending," "protecting," and "securing" Canada's Arctic sovereignty, but neither the integrity nor security of the European Arctic nor the larger concept of NATO's Northern Flank are emphasized in any detail.

This sets up the expectation that Canadians' defence priority should be to protect their own Arctic *sovereignty*. Does this mean at the expense of their commitments elsewhere, particularly in the European Arctic?<sup>8</sup> This message, if unintentional, is reinforced by a steady stream of recent think tank analysis and commentary on Canada's flagging defence capability.<sup>9</sup> As Canada's defence capability contracts, should its international commitments follow a similar trajectory in favour of basic national security needs such as protecting Arctic sovereignty?

The reasoning of less capability and thus less commitment is not as straight forward as it seems. Canadian strategy has long adhered to the logic that the defence of Canada is best provided not through a "Fortress Canada" approach but by Canada accepting international responsibilities to protect the larger international order (R BIO). The concept of state sovereignty is the bedrock upon which the R BIO is built, but Canada cannot retreat into thinking that bolstering its home defences and asserting its Arctic sovereignty militarily will substantively improve global stability and collective defence. Language about the need to balance domestic, continental, and global commitments to

reinforce the RBIO is present in *ONSF*, but the overall picture is disjointed and missing some key elements. It was articulated in a Canadian context most clearly and eloquently some 77 years ago in the Gray Lecture.

On 13 January 1947, Minister of External Relations (and future prime minister) Louis St. Laurent delivered his famous Gray Lecture at the University of Toronto, arguing how Canada's grand strategy should seek to entrench and reinforce the RBIO borne from the ashes of the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> This could be achieved by following five general principles. The first is a foreign policy that unites Canadians, grounded in the next three principles: political liberty abroad, international law, and the well-being of the individual. The fifth principle is accepting Canada's international responsibility to contribute to the RBIO from which Canadians derive the most effective defence of their country.

St. Laurent outlined how Canada can practically apply these five general principles, the most important being "Support For Constructive International Organization."<sup>11</sup> Canada cannot defend itself on its own, St. Laurent emphasized, and cannot "prosper if it does not have the support of those who hold the major share of the world's military and economic power."<sup>12</sup> Today, NATO members collectively hold most of the world's military and economic power.

While the Gray Speech predates the North Atlantic political and military alliance established in 1949, St. Laurent and his fellow Ottawa "mandarins" were anticipating and envisioning it. The Department of External Affairs actively joined in the initial talks in 1948 with the United Kingdom and United States that conceptualized what would become NATO,<sup>13</sup> and then in bringing it into being and helping to guide the alliance during its formative years along the five Gray Speech principles.<sup>14</sup> St. Laurent stated in his lecture that "there is little point in a country of our stature recommending international action if those who must carry the major burden of whatever action is taken are not in sympathy."<sup>15</sup> Canada had contributed to the creation of the RBIO framed by Britain and the United States, leading to enhanced Canadian security. By contributing abroad to the RBIO and deterrence through NATO, Canada was safer at home – including in its Arctic.

*ONSF* links NATO to the defence of Canada and notes how a more secure Canada, in turn, contributes to the alliance's "deterrence and defence posture." For example, the policy update promises that Canada "will continue playing an important role confronting Russian aggression through a steadfast commitment to NATO assurance and deterrence measures." It also emphasizes that "standing with our allies provides the best guarantee of our security and continued prosperity at home."<sup>16</sup>

The defence policy update also explains that Canada's NATO responsibilities are not limited to deploying forces abroad, but also require that we do not allow adversaries to launch attacks on our allies through Canada. The Arctic factors prominently in this equation, with the policy statement highlighting "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."<sup>17</sup> *ONSF* explains that "our contributions to securing the Arctic are an important component in the defence of NATO's western and northern flanks, and directly support broader NATO deterrence efforts." Doing so "will enable Canada to engage the world from a position of strength."<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, mixed messaging in *ONSF* falls short of demonstrating a clear understanding of and commitment to the grand strategy that Louis St. Laurent put forth in 1947.

*ONSF*'s major failing is it appears inadequate to secure the sympathy and support of its larger NATO allies.<sup>19</sup> Canada's defence spending continues to fall well below the 2% GDP spending threshold to which NATO members – including Canada – have committed.<sup>20</sup> Allies have expressed concerns about the Trudeau Government's promised

spending increases, spread out over a twenty-year period to reach a projected 1.76% GDP. This includes a recent letter from a group of American Senators urging Canada to immediately increase its defence spending.<sup>21</sup> While the planned procurement of a new fleet of Royal Canadian Navy submarines could push Canada over the 2% threshold, the programme is in its early phases and has yet to be costed. Accordingly, has Canada sent the strategic message that it is unreliable in meeting alliance commitments and has transitioned to an inward-facing sovereignty and North American defence focus with neither the intentions nor capability to deter its enemies from aggressive behaviour in other parts of the world?

Given constrained defence contributions and flagging allied support, where can Canada maximize its current contributions to start reversing this trend? *ONSF* elaborates that, “as a priority, Canada will meet our NATO defence commitments as they evolve in response to shifts in the global security landscape.” A major element of these commitments is connecting the defence of North America with the defence of “NATO’s western flank.” Additionally, the policy update states that with “our Arctic allies we will defend NATO’s northern regions.”<sup>22</sup> Ideally, this would imply that Canada’s contributions to the alliance should focus on these two flanks, particularly where they intersect. The *ONSF* language is telling, however, with the policy referencing NATO’s “northern regions,” not northern *flank*. Does this suggest Canadian uncertainty about what constitutes NATO’s northern flank, how this relates to the *ONSF*’s prioritization of “Canadian sovereignty,” and what a meaningful alliance contribution looks like in this respect?

During the Cold War, NATO established the Northern Command of Allied Command Europe (1952 -1994) which addressed the northern flank. The alliance vested this command with responsibilities over Norway, Denmark, and the northern part of Germany.<sup>23</sup> NATO’s current northern flank is centred on the Nordic countries, including the new allies of Finland and Sweden, and is commanded out of NATO Joint Forces Command Norfolk. This command states that its responsibilities run from “Florida to Finnmark, the Tropic of Cancer to the North Pole.” This includes protecting the SLOC linking North America and Europe.<sup>24</sup> This section of ocean is the crux of Canada’s NATO responsibilities, linking the defence of North America with the defence of Europe.

However, NATO’s new northern flank does not include Latvia. This is significant given Canada’s contribution as a framework nation lead for NATO’s Forward Land Forces in Latvia, where the bulk of the Canadian Army is devoted and is scaling up its battle group to a brigade. Latvia and the rest of the Baltics fall into the alliance’s eastern flank, running from Estonia south to Bulgaria,<sup>25</sup> thus making Canada’s major land force commitment out of alignment with *ONSF*’s focus on the western and northern flanks.<sup>26</sup> This also places a growing logistics burden on the Canadian military, which must support an expanding expeditionary force in Europe while the Canadian Army continues to contract in overall numbers – and the CAF as a whole is being told that its most urgent and important task is Arctic sovereignty.

The North Atlantic is the missing piece of *ONSF* that connects Canada’s NATO commitments together, involving the western, northern, and eastern flanks of the alliance. Canada’s alliance commitments to defending this stretch of ocean proved vitally important during the Second World War and the Cold War, and current competition with Russia make the North Atlantic strategically essential once again. The logic behind Russia’s “Bastion Strategy”<sup>27</sup> is to protect its Arctic waters and the strategic forces stationed on the Kola Peninsula. Many of these forces are designed to project power into the North Atlantic to threaten the SLOCs and even North America directly, with an eye to disrupting NATO’s ability to mobilize along its western flank and deploy resources to Europe.<sup>28</sup> In response, NATO has renewed its defence efforts along the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap to check this Russian power

projection.<sup>29</sup> Canada can maximize its international commitments by concentrating more of its defence emphasis on the waters and airspace of the North Atlantic.<sup>30</sup>

Canada currently has a western flank commitment defined primarily as an aerospace threat, a northern flank commitment that is primarily maritime in nature, and a commitment to NATO's eastern flank that is based around the army. Canada's modest military capabilities are spread thin across this huge area. The North Atlantic provides the strategic glue that binds Canada's commitments into a coherent contribution to NATO. The omission of the North Atlantic from *ONSF* must not detract from the larger message in St. Laurent's Gray Lecture: that Canada cannot lose track of its alliance responsibilities. Canada's contribution to NATO's northern regions is not only about "protecting Canadian Arctic sovereignty" but alliance security. In the near term, this responsibility means clarifying Canada's concept of the northern front to align it with NATO's. This connects the two fronts prioritized in *ONSF*, leading to a more coherent picture of how Canada's contributions fit in a NATO construct. In the longer term, the Gray Lecture reminds us not to neglect our international responsibilities to the point where we lose the support and sympathies of our larger military allies. In the end, upholding our international collective defence responsibilities still provides the strongest protection of Canada – including our Arctic sovereignty.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (2017), 79 at <http://dgpaapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Rikard Jozwiak, "NATO Launches 'Biggest Military Exercise Since The End Of The Cold War'," *Radio Free Europe* 25 October 2018 at <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-set-to-start-biggest-military-exercise-since-the-end-of-the-cold-war-/29561371.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Brown, "US Navy re-establishes Second Fleet amid Russia tensions," *CNN*, 4 May 2018 at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/04/politics/us-navy-second-fleet-russia-tensions/index.html> and "Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service* (24 March 2022), 34. See "Mission Statement," Commander, 2nd Fleet at <https://www.c2f.usff.navy.mil/About-Us/Mission/>. See also Jim Garamone, "DOD Establishes Arctic Strategy and Global Resilience Office," *DOD News*, 27 September 2022, at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3171173/dod-establishes-arctic-strategy-and-global-resilience-office/>.

<sup>4</sup> See Ryan Dean, "Military Threats In, To, and Through the Arctic East of Greenland and Implications for Canada," August 2023. <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/East-of-Greenland-report-RD.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, 79.

<sup>6</sup> Department of National Defence, *Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence* (2024), at <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/corporate/reports-publications/2024/north-strong-free-2024.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> For early commentary, see Wesley Wark, "Canada's new defence policy marks a crucial shift in strategic thinking," *Globe and Mail* 8 April 2024 at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canadas-new-defence-policy-marks-a-crucial-shift-in-strategic-thinking/> and Christopher Nardi, "New defence policy to focus on Arctic security, fixing 'unsustainable' gap in force size," *National Post* 8 April 2024 at <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/canada-to-focus-on-securing-arctic-improving-personnel-recruitment-and-retention-in-new-defence-policy>.

<sup>8</sup> For the "selling" of the defence policy update to Canadians, see Murray Brewster, "Shooting Blanks: Why so many Canadian defence policies fail to launch," *National Post* 13 April 2024 at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/defence-policy-canadian-forces-trudeau-nato-1.7172835>.

<sup>9</sup> For recent examples, see Richard Shimooka, “The Liberals are not going to fix Canada’s real defence spending problem,” *MLI The Hub*, 3 May 2024 at <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/liberals-not-going-to-fix-canada-defence-spending-problem-richard-shimooka-the-hub/> and Rob Huebert, “Opinion: Canada’s new Arctic defence policy: Is it too little and too late?” *Edmonton Journal* 1 May 2024 at <https://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-canadas-new-arctic-defence-policy-is-it-too-little-and-too-late>.

<sup>10</sup> Louis St. Laurent, “The Foundations of Canadian Policy in World Affairs,” 13 January 1947, *Statements and Speeches* No. 47/2, 5. For scholarly analysis of the Gray Lecture, see Adam Chapnick, “The Gray lecture and Canadian citizenship in history,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 37:4 (2007): 443-457 and Hector Mackenzie, “Shades of Gray? “The Foundations of Canadian Policy in World Affairs” in Context,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 37: 4 (2007): 459-473.

<sup>11</sup> St. Laurent, “The Foundations of Canadian Policy in World Affairs,” 9.

<sup>12</sup> St. Laurent, “The Foundations of Canadian Policy in World Affairs,” 9.

<sup>13</sup> Hector Mackenzie, “The North Atlantic Triangle and North Atlantic Treaty: A Canadian perspective on the ABC security conversations of March–April 1948,” *London Journal of Canadian studies* 20 (2004): 89-115.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Jockel and Joel Sokolsky, *Canada in NATO, 1949-2019* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021); David G. Haglund, and Stéphane Roussel, “Escott Reid, the North Atlantic treaty, and Canadian strategic culture,” in Greg Donaghy and Stéphane Roussel (eds), *Escott Reid: Diplomat and Scholar* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004), 44-66; and John W. Holmes, *The Better Part of Valour: Essays on Canadian Diplomacy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1970). See various works by Adam Chapnick on Canadian diplomatic history, including “The Golden Age: A Canadian Foreign Policy Paradox,” *International Journal* 64/1 (2009): 205-221.

<sup>15</sup> St. Laurent, “The Foundations of Canadian Policy in World Affairs,” 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Our North, Strong and Free*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Our North, Strong and Free*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Our North, Strong and Free*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Murray Brewster, “Trudeau heads for the hotseat at NATO summit as allies question Canada’s defence commitments,” *CBC News*, 8 July 2024 at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-nato-defence-spending-summit-1.7256027>; and Paul McLeary, “NATO is losing patience with one of its own members — and it’s not who you think,” *Politico*, 8 July 2024 at <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/07/08/nato-summit-canada-commitment-00166648>.

<sup>20</sup> For a timeline of NATO’s 2% guideline, see NATO, “Funding NATO,” 5 April 2024 at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_67655.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67655.htm).

<sup>21</sup> “US senators urge Canada to increase defense spending to NATO guideline,” *Reuters*, 24 May 2024 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-senators-urge-canada-increase-defense-spending-nato-guideline-2024-05-23/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Our North, Strong and Free*, 13, as well as viii, x.

<sup>23</sup> T. Ross Milton, “The Northern Flank,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine* 1 April 1988, at <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0488flank/>. See also, Gjert Lage Dyndal, “How the High North became central in NATO strategy: Revelations from the NATO archives,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34/4 (2011): 557-585.

<sup>24</sup> NATO, “Joint Forces Command Norfolk: About Us,” at <https://jfcnorfolk.nato.int/about-us>.

<sup>25</sup> NATO, “NATO’s military presence in the east of the Alliance,” 8 December 2023 at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_136388.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm). See also NATO, “Allied Joint Forces Command Brunsum,” at <https://jfcbs.nato.int/>.

<sup>26</sup> *Our North, Strong and Free*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> See Michael Paul and Göran Swistek, “Russia in the Arctic: development plans, military potential, and conflict prevention,” *SWP Research Paper* 3 (2022); James Lacey, “Battle of the Bastions,” *War on the Rocks*, 9 January 2020 at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/battle-of-the-bastions/>; Bredesen and Friis, “Missiles, Vessels and Active Defence”; and Keir Giles and Mathieu Boulegue, “Russia’s A2/AD Capabilities: Real and Imagined,” *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 49/1 (2019): 21-36; and Harri Mikkola, “The Geostrategic Arctic: Hard Security in the High North,” *FIIA Briefing Paper* 259 (November 2019).

<sup>28</sup> General Terrence J. O’Shaughnessy and Brigadier General Peter Fesler, “Hardening the Shield: A Credible Deterrent & Capable Defense for North America,” *Wilson Centre/Canada Institute*, September 2020.

<sup>29</sup> See Rebecca Pincus, “Towards a New Arctic: Changing Strategic Geography in the GIUK Gap,” *RUSI Journal* 165: 3 (2020): 50-8; Magnus Nordenman, “Back to the Gap: The Re-emerging Maritime Contest in

# STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES



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the North Atlantic," *RUSI Journal* 162:1 (2017): 24-30; and Gareth Jennings, "NATO Looks to Poseidon to plug GIUK Gap Against Russian Submarines," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly* 11 (2016).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Canada's recent purchase of P-8A Poseidon Multi Mission Aircraft designed primarily to hunt the submarines that would attempt to penetrate the GIUK Gap. Government of Canada, "Canada purchasing up to 16 P-8A Poseidon Multi Mission Aircraft for the Royal Canadian Air Force," 30 November 2023 at <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2023/11/canada-purchasing-up-to-16-p-8a-poseidon-multi-mission-aircraft-for-the-royal-canadian-air-force.html>.