

November 2024

“The most urgent and important task we face”: Framing the Arctic focus in Canada’s April 2024 defence policy update

P. Whitney Lackenbauer
Network Lead

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.

... Defending the Arctic is asserting Canadian sovereignty. To do so, we must take a new approach that improves and modernizes our defences in the region.

This means establishing greater presence, reach, mobility, and responsiveness in the Arctic and North to deal with disasters, threats, and challenges to our sovereignty.

Department of National Defence, *Our North, Strong and Free* (April 2024)

Arctic geopolitics and security continue to rise in profile on the Canadian political agenda. The Conservative government of Stephen Harper, which held office from 2006-15, supplemented its initial, narrow “use it or lose it” sovereignty agenda with a comprehensive Northern Strategy in which national defence was only one component (Lackenbauer 2021). When Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government came to office in 2015, it initially avoided language around sovereignty and security, believing that the Conservatives had managed to “brand” this language in a partisan sense (Lackenbauer, 2017). During public and political consultations, however, Northern Canadians insisted that any Canadian Arctic strategy had to incorporate both components. The Liberal defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, published in 2017, followed by the safety, security, and defence chapter of the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF) released two years later, returned to national defence as a key part of Canada’s “commitment to a safe, secure, and well-defended Arctic and North, and as a continued expression of Canada's enduring sovereignty over our lands and waters” (CIRNAC, 2019).

The ANPF stated that “while Canada sees no immediate threat in the Arctic and the North, as the region’s physical environment changes, the circumpolar North is becoming an area of strategic international importance, with both Arctic and non-Arctic states expressing a variety of economic and military interests in the region,” thus necessitating “effective safety and security frameworks, national defence, and deterrence” (CIRNAC, 2019). Then Russia’s brutal, full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 rocked the international order, with heightened geopolitical competition spilling over into Arctic regional affairs. What some commentators called the age of “Arctic exceptionalism,” marked by peaceful regional relations since the end of the Cold War, abruptly ended (although many of us question whether it ever existed at all – see, for example, Exner-Pirot and Murray, 2017; Dean and Lackenbauer, 2020; Smith, 2022). Consequently, much of the expert debate about the Arctic geopolitical environment has shifted from a conflict-or-cooperation binary to analyzing a continuum of competition involving the seven like-minded Arctic states (all of which are now NATO members), Russia, China, and other non-Arctic state and non-state actors.

Canada’s April 2024 defence policy update *Our North, Strong and Free (ONSF)* places an unprecedented focus on the Arctic – and particularly on Canada’s Arctic (DND 2024). Never before has Arctic sovereignty and security factored so prominently in a Canadian defence statement. Even *Defence in the ’70s*, which shared the overarching idea that the top priority of the Canadian Armed Forces is the defence of Canada and Canadians, did not confer on the Arctic the idea that it was “the most urgent and important task” for the Canadian military. Neither did the 1987 White Paper on defence, with its three polar projection maps and its emphasis on a new Arctic defence imperative to deter the Soviet Union (DND, 1987). Like these previous iterations of intensified Arctic security attention, however, the Department of National Defence has again produced a vision that conflates sovereignty, security, and the need for an expanded and enhanced military presence.

Canada’s 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, described the Arctic as “an important international crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security meet.” Reiterating longstanding narratives about the Arctic as a region undergoing massive change in an unpredictable and complex security environment, the federal government committed to “increase [the military’s] presence in the Arctic over the long-term and work cooperatively with Arctic partners.” Rather than promoting a storyline of inherent competition or impending conflict, however, the policy emphasized that “Arctic states have long cooperated on economic, environmental, and safety issues, particularly through the Arctic Council, the premier body for cooperation in the region. All Arctic states have an enduring interest in continuing this productive collaboration” (DND, 2017).

Seven years later, Minister of National Defence Bill Blair painted a more alarming picture of a region that adversaries are openly contesting:

In our North, we need to confront the reality of climate change. Our Arctic is warming at four times the global average, opening the region to the world, which was previously protected by the Polar Ice Cap year-round. By 2050, the Arctic Ocean could become the most efficient shipping route between

Europe and East Asia. We are seeing greater Russian activity in our air approaches, and a growing number of Chinese vessels and surveillance platforms are mapping and collecting data about the region. Meanwhile, states are rapidly building up their military capabilities in ways that impact our security in the Arctic—including submarines, long-range aircraft and hypersonic missiles that move faster and are harder to detect. As the Arctic becomes more accessible to foreign actors, we need to ensure our military has the tools to assert our sovereignty and protect Canada's interests. (DND, 2024a)

The statement evokes a sense of urgency, alleging that environmental changes have increased regional accessibility and thus open new threat vectors for competitors to exploit. “Canada must meet these new and emerging threats with resolve,” Minister of Foreign Affairs Mélanie Joly added in her opening message in the policy statement. “Vigorous assertion of our sovereignty, particularly in the Canadian Arctic, is a fundamental priority” (DND, 2024a).

Most Canadian sovereignty and security discourse emphasizes how emerging drivers of change create unprecedented challenge and uncertainty. *Our North, Strong and Free* highlights three “powerful, connected trends” that are reshaping global geopolitics: climate change, autocracies and disruptive states (particularly China and Russia) challenging the international order, and new and disruptive technologies that “are rapidly redefining conflict and what it takes to be safe and secure.” In highlighting the Arctic as the region of particular concern and priority, the Liberal government has chosen once again to *securitize* ideas around Arctic sovereignty, requiring extraordinary military action beyond the realm of normal politics (Dean, 2022).

Critically discussing the role of the Canadian Armed Forces in demonstrating or asserting sovereignty is nothing new. While grandiloquent proclamations about the precarity of Canada’s Arctic sovereignty are a staple in national discourse, these are often grounded in superficial understandings of the legal basis for Canada’s sovereignty and the nature of what is being contested. Furthermore, they are often ambiguous about why the armed forces should be the preferred method of addressing emergent challenges in sectors of security (political, economic, environmental, and societal) that typically fall outside of the conventional military threat envelope.

What is the nature of the threats facing Canada that imperil our sovereignty and security in the Arctic? Is the military the best instrument to mitigate and counter these threats? In *ONSF*, the Government of Canada insists that “Canada's Northwest Passage and the broader Arctic region are already more accessible, and competitors are not waiting to take advantage—seeking access, transportation routes, natural resources, critical minerals, and energy sources through more frequent and regular presence and activity.” Does this heightened maritime activity in Canada’s Arctic waters include foreign navies? Which pernicious actors are “exploring Arctic waters and the sea floor, probing our infrastructure and collecting intelligence”? Are these primarily military challenges, or illegal activities that should be countered and prosecuted using law enforcement and diplomatic tools? Because Canada has not updated its national security strategy since 2004 (PCO, 2004), it remains difficult to situate Canadian defence in a whole-of-government security context.

Our North, Strong and Free states that the Government of Canada is “seeing more Russian activity in our air approaches, and a growing number of Chinese dual-purpose research vessels and surveillance platforms collecting data about the Canadian North that is, by Chinese law, made available to China’s military” (DND, 2024a). Russian bomber flights that are routinely intercepted by NORAD do not transgress Canadian sovereign airspace (e.g. NORAD, 2023) and, while they may fly more aggressive patterns than before, climate change does not make northern air approaches more accessible to competitors. Furthermore, Chinese researchers, icebreakers, buoys, and balloons may serve dual-use agendas, but they do not represent conventional kinetic threats. Why characterize the Canadian Arctic as a region facing new, acute military pressures rather than more general national security ones inviting more deliberate coordination of the military instrument with other instruments of national power?

The *Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept*, released in fall 2023, recognizes that “the CAF is currently configured to counter overt military actions in the traditional domains of land, sea, and air by recognizable force elements of an adversary’s armed forces” (DND, 2023: 9). By contrast, Canada’s adversaries are more effective in integrating various instruments of national power and employing them effectively. To compete in this context, increasing the military’s “presence, reach, mobility and responsiveness across the country, particularly in our changing Arctic and North,” can contribute to whole-of-government and whole-of-society preparedness and responses. *ONSF* declares that:

Our military must be capable of undertaking a wide range of missions, including asserting Canadian sovereignty, conducting search and rescue, and assisting civil authorities when required. The Canadian Armed Forces also needs increased capacity to monitor our vast land mass, airspace and maritime areas, defend against threats to Canada as they arise, and be able to deploy quickly and efficiently across the country, especially in remote environments like our Arctic and North, or to assist Canadians facing wildfires, floods, or other climate-related disasters.

To address new threats through, to and in the Arctic and North, we will prioritize detecting and understanding threats across all military domains, increasing our military's presence, mobility and responsiveness in the Arctic, and robustly responding to threats when and where they materialize. This will also help address challenges to the safety and security of Indigenous and northern communities.

We will make investments to ensure that Canada remains well-defended. Collectively, these capabilities will address our biggest challenges in the Arctic and North—they will provide a broader footprint and prepositioned supplies and equipment in the region, much better eyes and ears in space, in the air, on the ground and underwater, striking power to deter threats far from our shores, and the ability to get to and deal with incidents faster.

We will broaden our ability to monitor our approaches and detect and deter threats before they reach Canada, and to share that information securely with our allies. (DND, 2024a)

To address this blend of missions and requirements, which include a diverse array of threats through, to, and in the Arctic, the Government of Canada proposes various material solutions. It commits to “explore options” for “renewing and expanding” the Royal Canadian Navy’s submarine fleet to enable it to “project a persistent

deterrent on all three coasts.” It will improve CAF mobility and presence on the land in the Arctic and North by acquiring new all-terrain vehicles “adapted to ice, snow and tundra” that “will allow the military to maintain awareness in remote regions and along Canada's entire coastline, and better respond to unauthorized activity.” Furthermore, promises to acquire specialized maritime sensors to monitor Canada’s approaches, build a new satellite ground station in the Arctic, and establish northern operational support hubs and other infrastructure. Even if this ambitious plan is funded and realized, synchronizing these instruments in a pan-domain campaigning approach and then coordinating them with whole-of-government efforts will require lucidity and innovation (DND 2023).

Canada’s 2017 defence policy 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” (DND, 2017). Since that time, NATO exercises off the coast of Norway and the stand up of new commands in support of Alliance efforts have reinvigorated attentiveness to NATO’s Northern Flank. The sea lines of communication linking North America to Europe are central to this concept, with the North Atlantic linking the defence of Canada and the Arctic with NATO. While *Strong, Secure, Engaged* specifically framed the North Atlantic as a geostrategic centre of gravity, this is largely missing from *ONSF*. The policy update 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 detail (Dean and Lackenbauer, 2024). 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? As the size of Canada’s armed forces contracts (Higgins, 2024), should its international commitments follow a similar trajectory in favour of basic national security needs such as protecting Arctic sovereignty? Fortunately, reported discussions between Canada, Germany, and Norway about a possible trilateral defence and security partnership covering the North Atlantic and the Arctic point in the other direction (Brewster, 2024b).

ONSF received significant criticism for projecting Canada’s defence spending that failed to meet the 2% GDP spending threshold to which NATO members – including Canada – have committed. Various NATO Allies expressed concern about promised spending increases spread out over a twenty-year period which, according to the policy update, would reach a projected 1.76% of GDP (Reuters, 2024; Brewster, 2024a; McLeary, 2024). In the face of this pressure, Minister Blair’s announced at the Washington NATO Summit on 10 July 2024 that Canada is launching a formal process to procure a fleet of up to twelve conventionally-powered, under-ice capable submarines – a purchase that will push Canada over the 2% threshold (DND, 2024b). The long timelines for major capital procurement programs in Canada means that this will be a protracted process.

ONSF also states that “defending this vast and challenging region, with coastlines and territory larger than the entirety of most other Arctic nations, a harsh climate, and limited physical and communications infrastructure, requires full community engagement and rethinking how we approach the defence of our country” (DND, 2024a). This promise to adopt a new approach – and particularly the focus on collaborating with Northern Indigenous partners and community stakeholders – should invite deliberate reflections on fundamental ideas and assumptions about “sovereignty,” “security,” and “presence.” An “inclusive approach to national defence”

that places Arctic rightsholders at the forefront and engages with them more substantively is likely to reveal that Indigenous Peoples envisage these concepts in broader and deeper ways than the Department of National Defence (Greaves and Lackenbauer, 2021).

Published in [Arctic Yearbook 2024](#).

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