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## NATO and the Arctic: Implications for Command and Control

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Canada has long opted against NATO playing a role in the Arctic. As recent as 2014, Canada rejected a reference to the Arctic at NATO's Strasbourg Summit.<sup>1</sup> Much of this opposition to NATO in the Arctic has come from the dual wish of the US and Canada to keep North America under the purview of NORAD rather than NATO.<sup>2</sup> However in recent years, Canada has been increasingly welcome to an increased NATO presence in the Arctic<sup>3</sup> and many observers have posited how NATO could best leverage changing security realities.<sup>4</sup> Since Finland and Sweden's entry into the Alliance, it bears asking what the command and control (C2) implications are for Canada with this shifting geopolitical reality. This strategic perspective briefly describes NATO's long history in the Arctic before turning to NATO's current presence and finally ending with some observations of how this shifting calculus has implications for Canada's C2.

### NATO's Long History in the Arctic

Although it may seem as though the Arctic question in NATO has emerged in recent years, the debate about NATO's role in the Arctic is long-standing. As early as the Second World War, the Arctic was an important region for obtaining meteorological data necessary for operating in northern Europe.<sup>5</sup> With NATO's establishment in 1949, the Arctic became an early flank that demanded protection and attention, particularly considering the defense of Norway and the role of the Arctic as the primary avenue of approach to North America, Europe, and Russia.<sup>6</sup> Such attention only became more important in the 1960s and 1970s with increased Soviet naval activity in the Arctic, leading to the build-up of exercising in northern Norway.<sup>7</sup> Training has continued to present day with the Trident Juncture and Cold Response multinational exercises. However, with the end of the Cold War, the importance of the Arctic for NATO took a backseat, where it remained for the 1990s and the early 2000s as a forgotten flank, particularly given the increasing prominence of other threats and responsibilities such as crisis management and terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Even increased concern about Russia's revisionist ambitions in the wake of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war did not inherently lead to NATO making a turn to the north. That being said, NATO allies have been exercising in the Arctic as part of the Norwegian-hosted Cold Response since 2006. However, the exercising did not translate to increasing NATO presence. In 2009, for example, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer acknowledged that a Joint Forces Centre (JFC) Arctic would be untenable.<sup>9</sup>

However, as the media, militaries, and governments alike have begun to turn their attention to the Arctic, so too has NATO. For example, in 2018, Norway hosted the Trident Juncture exercise that practiced how NATO countries would respond to an Arctic 5 violation in Norway and was the largest exercise held in the Arctic since the 1980s with over

50,000 participants from 31 nations. In 2019, NATO established JFC Norfolk. While JFC Norfolk does not explicitly cover the Arctic, it covers the UK, Norway, and the GIUK gap and as of now – includes Sweden and Finland. Drastic changes occurred in NATO's position in the Arctic with Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which galvanized both Finland and Sweden's decision to apply for membership to NATO. Exercises since 2022 have increased in scope, which expanded to formally include Finland and Sweden in the newly named Nordic Response in 2024.

While NATO's presence has certainly been expanding in the Arctic, many have debated whether NATO should be there and to what extent NATO's presence is stabilizing.<sup>10</sup> Much of this concern comes from worry that NATO's position in the Arctic is inherently understood as escalatory to Russia, who is already anxious about increasing NATO enlargement.<sup>11</sup> Those that caution against an increasing role for NATO in the Arctic point to the existential importance that Russia places on its secondary strike capability on the Kola peninsula, the importance of the Arctic for Russia's economic future given the Northern Sea Route and hydrocarbon extraction, and the centrality of the region for Russia's Bastion defense strategy.<sup>12</sup> Beyond concern about escalation vis-à-vis Russia, others have suggested that a lack of military challenge in the region largely was responsible for NATO's lack of interest in the region until recently. However, proponents for NATO in the Arctic suggest that Russia's increasing military presence and capabilities in the region demand if not full NATO attention, at least more directed policy.

## *NATO is in the Arctic*

Debates aside, with Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, the Alliance is effectively in the Arctic. Its historic emphasis on the GIUK gap today is paired with a focus on the Arctic coasts of Norway, Finland, and Sweden.<sup>13</sup> However, this emphasis has not materialized into an official NATO policy due in large part to disagreements amongst Alliance Members. For example, southern Alliance members might not be supportive of stretching resources to a region that does not concern them.<sup>14</sup> That being said, NATO's presence is certainly increasing in scope. The number of exercises occurring in the Arctic with NATO Allies and the increasing pace of port calls in Norway all point to a NATO that is more cognizant of its inherent position in the Arctic. Moreover, even though there is no Arctic strategy per se, the Alliance has published a Strategic Foresight Analysis (2021) that outlined the importance that NATO places on the Arctic given climate change and the increasing geostrategic significance of the region in the context of geopolitical competition.<sup>15</sup>

## **Command and Control Implications for Canada**

Increasing NATO presence and attention to the Arctic has implications for Canada, not least for Canada's Command and Control (C2). In brief, C2 is a military concept that describes a system that encompassing military operations and operations into a meaningful whole. It is both a system that includes how elements such as people, information, and support systems are arranged as well as a process with the ultimate aim of conducting military operations.<sup>16</sup> While the term itself is old in scope, its application has been recently changing, particularly in the context of the United States which in 2022 published a *Joint All Domain Command and Control (JAD2C) Strategy*. JAD2C understands command and control as a decision circle that involves integrating information across all domains, understanding the operational environment, and taking military action.<sup>17</sup>

While Canada does not unilaterally use the JAD2C concept, Canada's recent *Defence Policy Update* notes that it has an objective to modernize its C2 in the Arctic as part of Canada's NORAD modernization plan. However, what

does that mean? The Update does not go into further detail beyond general prognostications such as modernizing information systems, utilizing cloud-based systems, creating a new combined aerospace operations center, long-term Arctic satellites, better navigation and radio communication equipment.<sup>18</sup> This modernization begs important questions about whether Canada has the capabilities to do so and what that implies. For example, does Canada have the financial capacity to increase its Arctic surveillance or military equipment to improve its C2?

Given the nature of when the Update was released, it says little about how NATO's increasing role in the Arctic will have implications for Canada's Arctic C2 – of which there are three general open questions.

First, should Canada integrate its C2 with NATO – likely through NORAD – for a broader Arctic-wide operational image? Canada has long justified its contributions to NORAD as part of its NATO commitment in the defense of North America. Observers have written that the best way for Canada to contribute to NATO is exactly through this mechanism – NORAD modernization, investing in the Canadian coast guard, and better coordinating and sharing domain awareness information with NATO Allies in the Arctic.<sup>19</sup> If this indeed true, should Canada integrate its Arctic C2 with NATO allies? Through exercising, it is likely that this is already partially happening – but it begs important questions about whether further operational integration could or should be formalized. Such integration would likely be difficult given intelligence sharing challenges but not impossible. That being said, there is no indication that the US wants more NATO in the Arctic and in fact prefers NORAD to be the primary mechanism of aerospace and maritime monitoring and surveillance in its backyard. However, Canada should consider the extent to which NORAD and NATO could better operate together.

Second, how should Canada's intelligence sharing take place now across its bilateral relationship with the US through NORAD and the Five Eyes, bilateral relationships with other Arctic states, and now the seven NATO Arctic states? There are unquestionably hierarchies of information sharing that exist due to the nature of different agreements and relationships. The Five Eyes Alliance share the highest degree of intelligence, of which Canada and the US are a part. However, creating more mechanisms for intelligence sharing with NATO Arctic allies could be a strategy to not only increase Alliance cohesion but also better prepare for threats in the High North. Canada could pay attention to the increasing interoperability between Nordic states and decide to what extent a closer relationship with these European allies could be a win-win situation for the Alliance to create not only one European and one North American Arctic operational image but one that stretched across the Atlantic. It is unlikely that the same degree of integration sought amongst the Nordic countries could be achieved across the Atlantic but understanding what integration could be possible, whether through common air radar monitoring, air policing, and operations planning, still matters.

Third, if Canada does implement its NORAD modernization strategy, to what extent should it incorporate NATO in the planning and execution? As it stands, Canada and the US work closely together on the modernization strategy involving collaborating on creating advanced technological solutions for situational awareness, jointly modernizing their C2 systems, and investing to modernize NORAD infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> Should NATO similarly play a role in this? Are there comparative advantages to working with European Arctic Allies – for example – that might offer quicker technological solutions or lessons learned from their own Arctic experiences? As one concrete example, Canada's recent acquisition of new F-35 aircraft may be an opportunity to collaborate under the auspices of NATO with Arctic allies that similarly possess or will soon possess F-35s including Denmark, Finland, Norway, and the United States.

A long-held myth about NATO in the Arctic was that NATO's entry into the region would dilute Canadian sovereignty in its own Arctic. This could not be further from the truth. Increased NATO presence is now the reality due to Finland and Sweden's accession to the Alliance. Rather than diluting Canadian sovereignty, this shift offers Canada an opportunity to rethink its approach to its Arctic C2 with open questions that military leaders and policymakers should consider regarding NATO-NORAD integration, intelligence sharing, and NORAD modernization.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Charron, Andrea and James Fergusson. 2023. NATO is not needed in the North American Arctic. The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy. 28 December 2023. <https://peacediplomacy.org/2023/12/28/nato-is-not-needed-in-the-north-american-arctic/>

<sup>2</sup> Jouari, Nicholas. 2024. How to Take Advantage of NATO Enlargement in the Arctic. RAND Corporation. 24 June 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/06/how-to-take-advantage-of-nato-enlargement-in-the-arctic.html>

<sup>3</sup> Bykova, Alina. 2024. NATO has always been an Arctic Alliance (Part II). The Arctic Institute. 11 June 2024. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-alliance-part-ii/>

<sup>4</sup> Conley, Heather and Sophie Arts. 2023. NATO's Policy and Posture in the Arctic: Revisiting Allied Capabilities and Command Plans. George Marshall Fund. 5 July 2023. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/natos-policy-and-posture-arctic-revisiting-allied-capabilities-and-command-plans>

<sup>5</sup> Bykova, Alina. 2024a. NATO has always been an Arctic Alliance (Part I). The Arctic Institute. 28 May 2024. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-alliance-part-i/>

<sup>6</sup> Charron and Fergusson 2023

<sup>7</sup> Dyndal, Gjert Lage. 2011. How the High North became Central in NATO Strategy: Revelations from the NATO Archives. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34(4): 557-585.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ffpp11\\_natos-new-northern-direction.pdf](https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ffpp11_natos-new-northern-direction.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Bykova 2024a

<sup>10</sup> Linnainmaki, Joel, Matti Peru, Antti Pihlajamaa, Iro Sarkka, and Henri Vanhanen. 2024. NATO's new northern direction: The evolving role of the alliance in Europe's North. Finnish Institute of International Affairs. 4 April 2024. <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/natos-new-northern-direction>

<sup>11</sup> See Wolff, Andrew. 2015. The Future of NATO Enlargement after the Ukraine Crisis. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)* 91(5): 1103-1121; Menon, Rajan and William Ruger. 2020. NATO Enlargement and US grand strategy: a net assessment. *International Politics* 57 (3): 371-400.

<sup>12</sup> Black, James, Stephen Flanagan, Gene Germanovich, Ruth Harris, David Ochmanek, Marina Favaro, Katerina Galai, Emily Ryen Gloinson. 2020. Enhancing deterrence and defence of NATO's northern flank: Allied perspectives on strategic options for Norway. RAND Corporation. 25 March 2020. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4381.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4381.html)

<sup>13</sup> Charron and Fergusson 2023

<sup>14</sup> Bykova 2024a

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<sup>15</sup> NATO. 2023. Regional Perspectives Report on the Arctic: Strategic Foresight Analysis. NATO. <https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/regional-perspectives-2021-04.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Marine Corps. 2018. Command and Control: MCDP 6. <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCDP%206.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. 2022. Summary of the Joint All Domain Command & Control (JADC2) Strategy. Department of Defense. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/17/2002958406/-1/-1/1/SUMMARY-OF-THE-JOINT-ALL-DOMAIN-COMMAND-AND-CONTROL-STRATEGY.PDF>

<sup>18</sup> Canadian National Defence. 2024. Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence.

<sup>19</sup> Charron and Fergusson 2023

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. 2021. Joint Statement on NORAD Modernization. 17 August 2021. U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2735041/joint-statement-on-norad-modernization/>