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Monitor-and-Respond: An IN, TO, and THROUGH Analysis of U.S. National Security Documents regarding China and the Arctic

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Recent US national security documents frame the 2020s as “a decisive decade for America and the world,”¹ affording a “ten-year window for leadership to tackle our era’s defining challenges geopolitical competition between states and the threat posed by climate change.”² The documents define the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russia as the primary drivers of geopolitical competition, with the PRC framed as the persistent “pacing challenge”³ or “most consequential strategic competitor”⁴ with which the US will grapple for the foreseeable future, and Russia characterized as an “acute”⁵ but finite threat. As the US considers the PRC to be “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective,”⁶ this IN, TO, and THROUGH analysis⁷ focuses on how China is framed and presented in US Arctic security documents, and illuminates the connection between regional security and the larger rules based international order (RBIO).

US security documents are relentlessly international in their level of analysis. When they engage with regions, it is the Indo-Pacific (and to a lesser degree Europe) that receives the most attention. The “Indo-Pacific fuels much of the world’s economic growth,” the US 2022 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) asserts, “and will be the epicenter of 21st century geopolitics.”⁸ It is here

where “competition with the PRC is most pronounced,” but the strategies acknowledge that this competition “is also increasingly global.”⁹ This includes the Arctic. The *2024 DoD Arctic Strategy* (DAS) observes that the PRC’s presence in the Arctic is limited but suggests that it actively pursues “long-term planning and seeks to increase its influence and activities in the region.”¹⁰

Canadian policy centres the Arctic as important to its national interest and a key region where it can support global efforts to preserve the RBIO.¹¹ Given that US strategy considers China as the pacing challenge to the RBIO, how does the US frame China’s small footprint in the region¹² as well as its increasing interest in and attention to the Arctic? Using the IN, TO, and THROUGH framework to understand US perceptions of China as a potential threat regarding the Arctic, we conclude that Canada should focus more attention to the Western Arctic and appreciate that the possible threat posed by the PRC to that sub-region is different for the US and Canada. Canada does not pose the same power projection threat to the PRC *from* the Arctic as the US does. Thus, while the US must deal with PRC threats *to* its Western Arctic, Canada should focus on possible PRC threats *through* that subregion that aim to strike southward into North America. Our analysis seeks to establish a clearer baseline to track possible PRC threats that we should monitor and to which we should respond.

International Focus

The NSS emphasizes that “the most pressing strategic challenge is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy.” The document elaborates on how “the waging or preparing for wars of aggression, actively undermining the democratic political processes of other countries, leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression, and exporting an illiberal model of international order” all constitute forms of hostile revisionism.¹³ The strategy explains that this marks “a critical difference between our vision, which aims to preserve the autonomy and rights of less powerful states, and that of our rivals, which does not.”¹⁴ Ultimately, the US seeks an end state of “a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order.”¹⁵ The strategy positions integrated deterrence (defined as “working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of US national power, and our network of Alliances and partnerships”¹⁶) as the primary method of achieving this goal. The US *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) lays out that the government will “act urgently to sustain and strengthen U.S deterrence, with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the pacing challenge for the Department.”¹⁷

US strategic documents frame the PRC as a “serious challenge.” This is an important distinction from how it classifies Russia as a “threat.”¹⁸ While the PRC’s capability is growing, its intentions are still to be determined. Indeed, the PRC instead occupies the peculiar position of being both the “most consequential competitor” of the United States and one of their “largest trading partners.”¹⁹ This opens a wide continuum of possibilities, from cooperation to conflict, between the two powers. For example, the NSS notes that the PRC is “investing in a military that is rapidly modernizing,” and “increasingly capable... growing in strength and reach globally.”²⁰ Similarly, the PRC seeks to make the world more dependent on it through trade “while reducing its own dependence on the world.”²¹ Nevertheless, opportunities for cooperation on common challenges exist. The NSS notes that the US “will always be willing to work with the PRC where our interests align,”²² such as addressing climate change.²³ Ultimately, US strategic documents explain that the US will assess the actions of the PRC globally over the coming decade to determine if strategic competition is moving towards cooperation or towards threat.

Despite not explicitly labelling the PRC as a threat, the DoD places China at the centre of their national defence priorities. Specifically, the US will defend itself “paced to the growing multi-domain threat posed by the PRC,” while preparing “to prevail in conflict when necessary – prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific region” followed by “the Russia challenge in Europe.”²⁴ In other regions of the world, the US will “leverage security cooperation and capacity building with partners, backed by a monitor-and-respond approach that takes advantage of the deterrent value of the Department’s ability to deploy forces globally at the time and place of our choosing.”²⁵ Put differently, the US will be proactive in the Indo-Pacific with respect to China and then in Europe with respect to Russia, but elsewhere it will react with allies and using its own expeditionary forces to address threats that arise.

In the guiding US strategic documents, the international to regional level of analysis for both the Indo-Pacific and Europe are focused and symmetrical. That is, whether a reader looks up from the regional to the international or down from it, the framing of China as a challenge to both the Indo-Pacific and international system is clear. For example, passages such as the “PRC’s coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences”²⁶ are replete in the documents, linking capabilities and intentions across the analysis.

American Framing of China in the Arctic

The US seeks an end state for the Arctic “that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative.”²⁷ The *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (NSAR) elaborates that a “peaceful Arctic will have guardrails” or rules and norms “to manage competition and resolve disputes without force or coercion. Stability results from countries acting responsibly and in accordance with international law, rules, norms, and standards, including freedom of navigation.”²⁸ The PRC seeks to undermine this goal by revising the governance of the region in two ways. First, US strategy asserts that the PRC wishes to “open” or internationalize the Arctic, wresting away the governance mechanisms of the Arctic states so that it has a freer hand to operate.²⁹ The DoD notes that past Chinese efforts have tried to steer the Arctic into “a global commons” for the “shared future for mankind,” thus challenging the sovereign rights of the Arctic states.³⁰ Second, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has made that Arctic state increasingly reliant on the PRC for financing energy development and exports from its north. “Increasingly, the PRC and Russia are collaborating in the Arctic across multiple instruments of national power” despite “significant areas of disagreement” between the two countries. Thus, opportunity and necessity are driving “their growing alignment in the region,” which is of concern” to the United States.³¹

A driving assumption in US security documents is that the PRC will increase and normalize its presence in the Arctic,³² which will in turn lead to it having greater influence over the region. The NSAR observes that “over the past decade,” the PRC is increasing its influence in the Arctic by “an expanded slate of economic, diplomatic, scientific, and military activities.”³³ This includes having “doubled its investments,” focusing them on critical mineral extraction and scientific activities. This scientific research is “dual use” meaning that it has “intelligence or military applications in the Arctic.”³⁴ Similarly, the PRC has been dangling a “Polar Silk Road” to Arctic states in order “to gain a footing in the Arctic.”³⁵ This evokes the idea that China has expanded its footprint in the region – although the actual results of its attempts to do so outside of Russia have been much more modest than most popular commentary suggests.³⁶

While forging economic ties is one pathway to PRC influence in the region, strategic documents also focus on China developing primarily maritime power projection capabilities that could be deployed into the Arctic. The DAS highlights that the PRC is expanding its icebreaker fleet and sent People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) “vessels into the Arctic for the first time”³⁷ (although far south of the Arctic Ocean) when they operated in international waters off the southern coast of Alaska with Russian Navy ships in 2022 and 2023.³⁸ The Chinese Coast Guard and Russian

Federal Security Service signed an Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) on maritime law enforcement in April of 2023³⁹ that “could open the door for further PRC presence in the Arctic and along the NSR [Northern Sea Route].”⁴⁰ Accordingly, US strategists conclude that the PLAN has “demonstrated the capability and intent to operate in and around Arctic region through exercises alongside the Russian Navy over the past several years.”⁴¹ The US expects that Sino-Russian maritime exercises will become more common,⁴² although it is unspecified whether they will extend beyond the Bering Sea into the Arctic Ocean. Until 2032, the US has decided to “monitor-and-respond” to Chinese capabilities and intentions.⁴³

Chinese Threats IN, TO, and THROUGH the Arctic

An IN, TO, and THROUGH analysis of American perceptions of China and the Arctic is complicated by two factors. First, US strategic documents imply that China is a *potential* threat rather than an explicit one (with the same documents characterizing Russia as the latter). This entails a “reading between the lines” approach that can run the risk of China becoming a sort of tautology – a threat to everything. This frustrates a finer grain analysis of future threats posed by the PRC to and in the region. Second, China does not possess any Arctic territory, ruling out the IN portion of the methodology as China cannot produce kinetic threats that originate from there (unless it were to use scientific icebreakers or submarines as launch platforms).⁴⁴ It is important to recognize that PRC efforts to directly grow its military’s “global footprint and working to establish a more robust overseas and basing infrastructure”⁴⁵ have not materialized in the Arctic. Indirect methods to leverage PRC control by Chinese companies through a “Polar Silk Road” are also confined to the Russian Arctic.⁴⁶ Similarly, while PRC ships and aircraft could increasingly operate in the Arctic, they will not be based there for the foreseeable future.

The NSS posits that climate change is the major threat TO the Arctic, followed by Russia. This is the reverse of other strategic documents which posit Russia as the most acute threat to international security, followed by climate change.⁴⁷ Conceptualizing climate change as a driver of threats TO the Arctic sets up the logic that this will facilitate greater access to the region,⁴⁸ meaning that it “is becoming a venue for strategic competition.”⁴⁹ Chinese cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, amplified by Western sanctions flowing from Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, feeds US perceptions that regional access driven by climate change equates to a greater possibility of a PRC threat TO the Arctic.

The closest that US strategies come to presenting an explicit PRC threat is to Arctic governance.⁵⁰ By undermining agreed to rules and norms amongst the Arctic states, the PRC

could pose future economic, environmental, and societal threats TO the Arctic. For example, Chinese fishing fleets could engage in future illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, damaging fragile food webs already stressed by climate change.⁵¹ Similarly, poorly regulated mining of the “Arctic’s significant deposits of in-demand minerals essential to key technology supply chains” could be a threat TO the Arctic environment. Such actions can have second order effects, posing “changes to traditional lifestyles” of various Arctic peoples.⁵² Threats TO the military defence of the Arctic are more implicit in US strategic statements.

The NDS states that the PRC “seeks to target the ability of the Joint Force to project power to defend vital US interests and aid our Allies in crisis or conflict.”⁵³ Of particular concern to both the PRC and the US is its ability to project power into the Indo-Pacific. The North American Arctic, and more specifically Alaska, is “integral to the execution of Indo-Pacific operations as the northern flank for projecting military force from the US homeland to that region.”⁵⁴ Alaska’s defence infrastructure to project this power also makes it an obvious target for the PRC in the event of a broader international conflict.⁵⁵ As the NDS observes, this move would “exploit advantages in geography and time backed by a mix of threats to the US homeland and to our Allies and partners”⁵⁶ in seeking to frustrate US deployment to the Indo-Pacific theatre.⁵⁷ The NDS notes that the PRC has at its disposal “a wide array of tools in an attempt to hinder US military preparation and response in a conflict”⁵⁸ or to employ in “complex escalation dynamics.”⁵⁹ These range from nuclear weapons to conventional warheads delivered by an increasingly wide array of delivery systems, from intercontinental ballistic missiles to hypersonic vehicles to cruise missiles. Most of these weapons would be deployed as long-range fires from outside the Arctic as part of the PRC’s goal “to project [its own] military power at greater distance.”⁶⁰ These threats are not limited to the kinetic but also include cyber-attacks.⁶¹ PRC threats TO the Arctic – particularly Alaska – are designed to prevent US power from being projected FROM it into the Indo-Pacific.

PRC threats TO the defence infrastructure of the North American Arctic also would pave the way for attacks THROUGH it on the US homeland and Canada. As the DAS notes, “the Arctic holds our northern approaches to the US homeland.”⁶² Hence the North American Arctic – including Canada – contains infrastructure that provides aerospace warning, aerospace control, and maritime warning capabilities to NORAD. Adversaries would seek to destroy or disrupt this critical infrastructure in the case of an armed conflict. Damaging infrastructure that facilitates domain awareness “would hamper the US military’s ability to operate in the region”⁶³ and undermine its ability to detect, deter, and defend against threats to the US homeland.⁶⁴ The loss

of this infrastructure would render the Arctic “a strategic blind spot”⁶⁵ in terms of integrated deterrence for threats from and passing through the Arctic.⁶⁶ While US strategies in this respect are oriented to the threat posed by Russia, one can infer that the same logic holds for the PRC.⁶⁷

Growing technological advancements are enabling more and different options for the PRC to strike THROUGH the Arctic. The NSS observes that the PRC “is accelerating the modernization and expansion of its nuclear capabilities.” This includes establishing “a nascent nuclear triad” enabling “a high degree of survivability, reliability, and effectiveness. This could provide the PRC with new options before and during a crisis or conflict.” These nuclear forces are also being supplemented “with a broader set of kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities, including cyber, space, information, and advanced conventional strike.”⁶⁸ Given the ballistic paths for some of these delivery systems, threats THROUGH the North American Arctic are growing in scope, providing more flexible options for the PRC in the event of conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

What can Canada Learn?

We contend that Canada should focus more attention on the Western Arctic and appreciate that the possible kinetic threat the PRC could pose to this subregion is different for the US than for Canada. The PRC is framed as an implicit threat TO the North American Arctic – specifically Alaska – with the intent to disrupt US power projection capabilities into the Indo-Pacific region. From this perspective, Alaska is the northern flank of the Indo-Pacific, the strategic northern hinge of USNORTHCOM and INDOPACOM. Canada does not pose the same power projection threat FROM the Western Arctic to the PRC as the US does. Thus, while the US must address possible PRC threats TO and THROUGH its Western Arctic, Canada should focus on possible PRC threats THROUGH that subregion that could travel south deeper into the continent.

The possible PRC threat TO the Western Arctic that Canada and the US share is to regional governance. Essentially the PRC can increase its influence through upending norms, rules, and institutions at the expense of the Arctic states, including Canada. This is driven by the thesis contained within US strategies that climate change will open the Arctic, leading to greater strategic competition and a proliferation of possible future threats. While there is little evidence of this to date in a North American Arctic context, the strategies provide a window for this development out to 2032. This uncertainty drives a “monitor-and-respond” approach to the Arctic during this assessment period. In the meantime, the US will deepen relationships with allies and partners to uphold norms and rules of region.⁶⁹ This includes building additional ties with Canada and influencing its policy regarding China.

The US anticipates possible PRC threats THROUGH the Arctic in the future, given that country's growing capability for long-range fires that can strike North America. This scenario resembles the historical Soviet and current Russian threat, only to a lesser degree. Canada's alliance commitments, particularly in the binational North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), are pivotal in defending against such a scenario. Current US strategy relies on deterrence to prevent such an attack THROUGH the Arctic.⁷⁰ Upgrading domain awareness to keep pace with these threats is essential⁷¹ and Canada has made "generational" commitments to modernize its contributions to NORAD that will further entrench its important position in continental defence.⁷²

We hope that this analysis of US strategic documents helps to establish a baseline for Canadian tracking of possible PRC security threats TO and THROUGH the Western Arctic. It provides a 2032 timeframe to monitor and respond from this baseline. The new Trump Administration could dramatically increase pressure on Canada to accelerate its modernization efforts or to expand the scope of Canada's involvement in continental defence. The incoming US government also may wish to move away from deterrence towards active missile defence, which would extend beyond the current effort devoted to checking North Korea⁷³ and be more akin to an updated Strategic Defense Initiative advocated during the Reagan Administration of the 1980s.⁷⁴ This could necessitate Canadian involvement, bringing a formal shift from aerospace awareness and air control to aerospace control.⁷⁵ Whatever the case, Canadian strategists and decision makers must remain attentive to U.S. strategic assessments in discerning how Canada can contribute substantively to enhancing North American defence and security with our "premier partner"⁷⁶ and ally.

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