

March 23, 2026

The Canadian Rangers: Our Quiet, Confident Approach to Asserting Arctic Sovereignty

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In 1946, the Second World War had just ended and military planners hauled out polar projection maps in recognition that the Canadian Arctic had become a strategic frontier in the atomic age. Was this a potential route for invasion? What would it take to defend it?

To test mobility, equipment, and logistics in extreme Arctic conditions, the Canadian army and air force conducted Operation Muskox: 5,000-kilometre journey starting in Churchill, Manitoba. Forty-eight soldiers in eleven massive 4½-ton Canadian-designed snowmobiles (“Penguins”) would project north through the Kivalliq region to Baker Lake, then proceed to the Arctic Ocean coast at Perry River before moving west through the Kitikmeot region to Kugluktuk (then known as Coppermine). From there they travelled south east of the Mackenzie River into Peace River country in northeastern British Columbia, before a train carried the worn out snowmobiles to Edmonton. Ultimately, the resources and effort needed to complete Operation Muskox demonstrated that it was highly unlikely that any enemy force could or would attempt an overland invasion of North America through the Arctic. It also showed that Canadians could do what others could not, generating new knowledge about logistics and the constraints projecting armed forces into our North.

Fast forward to 2026, and international eyes are again on the Arctic. Exaggerated rhetoric about a newly “accessible” Arctic has fed perceptions that climate change is opening the region to whoever wants to head there to pass through, or to extract its bounty of mineral and energy resources. In response, successive governments have promised to increase Canada’s military footprint in the Arctic, with Canada’s 2024 defence policy update declaring that “asserting Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic and northern regions” is “the most urgent and important task we face.” The need for investment is warranted, but vague statements about the need to assert sovereignty can obfuscate that we have the internationally recognized right to control our Northern lands, seas, and resources.

March 12th brought the welcome announcement of a comprehensive \$35-billion plan to modernize and expand military infrastructure, including upgrades to forward operating locations that enable NORAD operations, Northern Operational Support Hubs and Nodes to enable Canadian domestic missions, and multi-use infrastructure such as runway improvements and road construction in various locations across the Arctic.

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Concurrent to these announcements that will expand the military's future footprint, we have a persistent presence through the Arctic in the form of the Canadian Rangers – an often misunderstood but uniquely Canadian way of sustaining a defensive capability throughout a sparsely populated homeland that does not face an acute military threat. The Rangers are the military's permanent presence in every Arctic community. They are not combat forces, but they are elite operators in the region. Their service as the eyes, ears and voice of the Canadian Armed Forces in the North – and of Northerners in the military – deserves more recognition.

Amidst all of the high-level announcements and strategic messaging about rising competition, 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group are currently undertaking a long-range patrol across the Arctic coastline. A core team left Inuvik by snowmobile in the western Arctic in mid-February, headed north to the Arctic coast where they endured whiteouts and high winds in the coldest winter in recent memory, and have pushed east through Tuktoyaktuk, Paulatuk, Kugluktuk, Cambridge Bay, and Gjoa Haven. Supported by the noble Twin Otter crews of the Royal Canadian Air Force's 440 (Transport) Squadron and other military elements, they will soon turn south along the Kivilliq coast to Churchill, Manitoba. Their route retraces some of Operation Muskox in reverse, but with modern equipment coupled with age-old local and traditional knowledge and experience.

The long-range patrol is part of Operation NANOOK, the Canadian Armed Forces' signature Arctic operation that has been recast to encapsulate the many military activities that are conducted year-round to secure our northern regions. Their snowmobile tracks may be temporary, but the sovereignty that they exercise is enduring. In an uncertain world, they demonstrate practical expertise and resourcefulness. While we are rightly worried about external forces, it is also time to celebrate the strength and capacity that resides in the Canadian North – and the Rangers' unique form of dedicated service.

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