



COMMENTARY

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# The Arctic: A Primary Canadian National Interest

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Canadians happily sing in our national anthem O Canada, “the True North Strong and Free”; but a more apt description would be “the True North Weak and Ignored”. Forty percent of Canada’s land mass is considered Arctic and Northern. There are 162,000 kilometres of Arctic coastline, accounting for 75% of Canada’s national coastlines, making Canada’s coastline the world’s longest. But if the territory is vast, the population is small at 200,000 inhabitants, half of whom are indigenous. Our Arctic neighbours are Russia, Alaska/the United States, and Greenland/Denmark, putting the Arctic at the centre of geopolitical rivalries since 1945.

Lester Pearson recognized this in 1946, even before the Cold War started, when he [wrote](#) in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, “Canada Looks Down North,” that air routes over the Arctic and the North Pole were the shortest distances between North American and European cities, thereby joining “the two greatest agglomerations of power in our world, the USSR and the USA.” The consequence of this is that “Canada, like Russia, is looking to the North as a land of the future.”

Fast forward more than two generations, and today’s analysts and decision-makers are still preoccupied with the geography of the Arctic and how it may impact global affairs and national security, especially after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine heightened global tensions, with Russia even threatening nuclear war. A 2022 University of Ottawa Task Force on National Security, with prestigious contributors like Vincent Rigby (a former national security and intelligence advisor to Justin Trudeau), for example, [called](#) for “a serious review by Canada of its presence in the Arctic, including its military footprint and capabilities, which have received scant attention over the decades despite considerable government rhetoric to the contrary.” The Senate

Committee on National Security, Defence and Veterans Affairs is currently examining Canadian military preparedness in the Arctic and it will certainly find large gaps between stated objectives and existing capabilities. This was made clear in April 2023 when *The Washington Post* produced something of a bombshell when it [published](#) a leaked assessment bearing the seal of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff which listed many Canadian military inadequacies including that “significant Arctic capabilities and modernization plans have not materialized.”

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### **Why the Arctic is Central to Canadian Interests**

Foreign policy is all about interests and values and an Arctic priority is central to both concerns. This essay is primarily about national interests, but the Arctic is one of the few areas where Canadian interests and values converge. There is an [ongoing](#)



[debate](#) in Canada about whether interests or values should be the primary driver of foreign policy, but the Arctic fulfills the criteria definitions of both propositions, so all the more strange that the Arctic is so often ignored.

Debates over how to define the national interest began soon after Canada was created in 1867, with the Canada First movement declaring, in 1874, that “we form a new and distinct political organization for promoting, by a joint endeavour, the national interest upon a particular principle on which we are all agreed.”<sup>1</sup> Frank Underhill, in his seminal 1935 article, “The Conception of a National Interest”, thought that the principles dominating the national interest should be security, abundance and equality.<sup>2</sup>

Historian J.L. Granatstein, writing in 2022, did not diverge too far from Underhill’s list, [believing](#) that there is a ready consensus around five goals:

1. Canada must protect its territory and the security of its people.
2. Canada must strive to maintain its unity.
3. Canada must protect and enhance its independence.
4. Canada must promote the economic growth of the nation to support the prosperity and welfare of its people.
5. Canada should work with like-minded nations for the protection and enhancement of freedom and democracy.

The Arctic is central to the attainment of four of these interests, making it perhaps the single most important region for Canadian engagement. As recognized by Pearson in 1946, and in every Defence White Paper since, the possibility of a

missile and bomber attack by Russia on continental North America ebbs and flows depending on the state of great power rivalries, but it is a continuing threat. Hypersonic cruise missiles are a new and dangerous technological advance in this respect. Reducing that threat by early warning infrastructure and active defence capabilities in the North is a significant Canadian contribution to deterrence. For that reason, it was welcome news that Canada committed, in June 2022, to spend 5 billion dollars on an over-the-horizon polar radar system to replace the North Warning System (a 1980s chain of radar stations that evolved from the Dew Line system built in the 1950s).

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Northern capabilities to identify, track and destroy potential missile and bomber attacks are not only essential for Canada’s security, but equally so for the security of the United States. If Canadian-American relations are Canada’s number one priority, then the place to start is to ensure that we use our vast Arctic territory to enhance American military security by jointly managing and contributing to the common defence through NORAD. Upgrading the North Warning System is an indication that common sense has at last prevailed in Ottawa. There is a troubling precedent, however, if Ottawa had continued to

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Underhill, Frank H., *In Search of Canadian Liberalism* (Toronto: the Macmillan Co, 1960), 172.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.



dither. During World War II, the Americans sent a vast workforce to Northern Canada to build the Alaska highway without any Canadian officials being present or even knowing what was going on: it took the intervention of the British High Commissioner, Malcolm MacDonald, to warn the Mackenzie King government about the “American army of occupation.”<sup>3</sup> King finally woke up, sent some officials and Canada eventually paid the U.S. significant sums for the infrastructure when Canada took over its maintenance and control after the War – a warning that Canadian independence could be at peril if neglect and free riding come to define Canada’s stance in the North.

Being a laggard in northern defence could adversely affect Canadian independence and our standing with the United States and other allies, but if the opposite were true – if Canada was a leader in Arctic capabilities – it would benefit greatly our relations with the United States. If Canada had ample icebreaking capacity on both coasts, for example, it could assist Alaska if emergencies arise. The U.S. is vastly ahead of Canada in almost all military capability but not in Coast Guard icebreaking (the sole heavy icebreaker in the U.S. fleet, the *Polar Star*, was commissioned in 1976 and is aging out similar to Canada’s CCGS *Louis S. St-Laurent* which entered service in 1969). The Yukon already has close relations with Alaska and an Arctic-enabled Canada would further allow our diplomats to develop close relations with Alaska’s two senators in Washington. In the same vein, but more broadly, scholars like Zachary Paikin [apply various criteria](#) to states to measure if they are middle powers and, unlike the Cold War years “when Canada was a leading middle power within one of two bounded geographic blocs,

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<sup>3</sup> Nordman, Curtis. “The Army of Occupation: Malcolm Macdonald and US Military Involvement in the Canadian Northwest”. In *The Alaska Highway: Papers of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Consortium*, edited by Kenneth Coates, 83-101 (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1985).

today it faces the prospect of becoming a marginal state.” One criterion for having influence is to have capacity relative to your neighbours: if Canada was a leader in a subset of relevant capacities – Arctic science, icebreaking, surveillance and detection, food security in the North, etc. – it would have real leverage even if its overall military contribution was still modest.

In 1935, Frank H. Underhill said abundance was in the national interest. Among the many contributions the North makes to Canadian wealth, two are particularly notable in 2023. Strategic minerals, like lithium and cobalt, are the key components to drive the low carbon and digital economy and the competition for strategic minerals is fierce. China, which describes itself as a “near-Arctic power” is currently the dominant player across critical minerals supply chains. In December 2022, Canada launched its Critical Minerals Strategy and half of the 31 minerals listed are to be found in the Northwest Territories. Indeed, the indigenous-led Nechalacho rare earths project is the first rare earths mine in Canada and only the second in North America. There is precedent for the North supplying key minerals for national security: the Port Radium mine at Great Bear Lake mined uranium to be sent south to the Manhattan Project to build the first atomic bomb. If Canada can become a major supplier of critical minerals, it will both produce great wealth (which needs to be shared with local citizens as in the Nechalacho mine) and establish itself as an important hub or pivot state in the strategic competition with China.

There is also potential wealth off our Arctic coastline. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) gives coastal states a 12 nautical mile territorial sea with full sovereignty rights, and a 200 nautical mile continental shelf exclusive economic zone that allows countries the rights to exploit resources like deep-sea



mining or oil and gas exploration in the seabed and subsoil (the economic zone confers rights below the surface of the sea; the surface waters are international waters). Half of the Arctic Ocean's 14 million square kilometres is already claimed by the five coastal states. Canada's economic zone of approximately 2.9 million square kilometres is the **seventh largest in the world**. But beyond this bounty for coastal states, the Law of the Sea provides a process for assessing further claims if science can delineate that the continental shelf extends beyond 200 nautical miles. States submit claims to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, which examines the submitted data drawn from mapping underwater geological features like ridges (Canada began collecting data in 2003 and submitted a claim in 2019, with an addendum in 2022). The Commission eventually judges the accuracy of the claim and makes recommendations. If states have overlapping claims, they must eventually negotiate the boundaries. In 2021, Russia made a maximum claim that its continental shelf stretched right up to the exclusive economic zones of both Canada and Denmark/Greenland, potentially giving it 75% of the seabed in the central parts of the Arctic Ocean. Canada then revised its 2019 submission in 2022, now arguing that its continental shelf extended to 2.4 million square kilometres, an area about the size of the Prairie provinces. It will be years before the UN Commission makes recommendations on Canada's claim but when it does, Canada must negotiate with Russia. The stakes are potentially very large indeed.

Professor Granatstein's last component of our national interests was cooperation with our friends and allies and here, too, the Arctic potentially looms large. Russia's invasion of Ukraine spurred Finland and Sweden to seek NATO membership and when both achieve it, seven out of the eight Arctic states will be members of the Alliance. NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg,

*Defending North America, not just Europe, is part and parcel of defending NATO – there are two geographic components to the transatlantic alliance.*

visited the Canadian Arctic in August 2022 and **wrote** in *The Globe and Mail* that, "NATO has a clear interest in preserving security, stability and co-operation in the High North." More attention within the Alliance will be paid to its northern flank (Finland shares a 1,300-kilometre border with Russia, greatly expanding NATO's physical border with Russia). Russian threats towards Finland or Norway are much more likely than Russian incursions into Canada's Arctic. Canada already leads a NATO battlegroup in Latvia; it should also work closely with Norway, Finland and Sweden, formally or informally, on operating in northern conditions and the Arctic should become more of a focus in NATO planning.<sup>4</sup> From the 1960s to the 1980s, Canada was committed to sending a 5,000-troop Air-Sea Transportable Battle Group to Norway if that country were attacked. It might be time again for Canada to have a formal mission in support of NATO's now greatly expanded northern flank. Defending North America, not just Europe, is part and parcel of defending NATO – there are two geographic components to the transatlantic alliance.

## The Challenge of Implementation

The case that a greater concentration on the Arctic would fulfill several of Canada's national interests is compelling but articulating a strategy and actually making it happen are very different

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<sup>4</sup> The NATO/Canada/Arctic nexus is succinctly examined by Heather Exner-Pirot and Robert W. Murray in the National Post, September 20, 2022: <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/opinion-nato-needs-to-play-a-bigger-role-in-the-arctic-and-canada-needs-to-let-it>



things. In recent years, the Government of Canada's rhetoric about our foreign policy goals and accomplishments has been effusive but the results have been meagre at best for the very basic reason that Canada [underinvests](#) in its military, development and diplomatic capacity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Arctic. In 2008, for example, Stephen Harper announced that Canada's aging heavy icebreaker, CCGS Louis S. St-Laurent, would be replaced by a new vessel, the CCGS John G. Diefenbaker: Yet in 2023, steel has yet to be laid, though the government is now promising to do so. In 2007, Mr. Harper announced that Canada would construct a naval refuelling facility at Nanisivik, Baffin Island to service new Arctic patrol vessels with a planned opening in 2013. Plans initially were for year-round personnel and a jet airstrip as well as the naval facility, but these were soon scaled back due to costs. As with the icebreaker program, delays ensued year after year. It is now expected that the facility will not be operational until 2024-25, 18 years after it was first announced. Meanwhile in the same period, as Rob Huebert, a prominent Arctic defence analyst, has [noted](#), Russia has modernized and reopened 13 Cold War military bases in the Arctic as well as dozens of smaller posts.

The most comprehensive examination of the gap between the critical objective of surveillance and detection in the Arctic – the starting point for the enforcement of sovereignty – and the required capabilities is contained in [“Report 6--Arctic Waters Surveillance”](#) by the Auditor General of Canada issued in November 2022. Immediately after the title, it states its conclusion “the Federal government has not addressed long-standing issues that affect its surveillance of Canada's Arctic waters.” The audit focused on maritime domain awareness, because as Auditor General Karen Hogan noted, “to be able to assess safety and security risks adequately and respond appropriately, Canada must be aware of

what happens in Arctic waters.” Since 2011, an interdepartmental Marine Security Operating Group has repeatedly identified gaps, looming equipment obsolescence and weaknesses in satellite surveillance. but limited actions have been taken. The report concludes, “we found significant risks that there will be gaps in Canada's surveillance, patrol, and presence in the Arctic in the coming decade as aging equipment reaches the end of its useful service life before replacement systems become available.”

The news is not all bad about Canadian capabilities in the Arctic; the Federal government recently announced the purchase of 88 F-35 fighter jets to provide North American air defence (after campaigning in the 2015 election not to purchase the plane). After years of dithering, Canada will invest in a new Northern Warning system and Arctic patrol vessels are finally entering service. But the Auditor General's report on Arctic surveillance points out, in stunning detail, that there is indeed a difference between stating a policy and achieving it and in the Arctic, the implementation history is largely one of neglect and delay.

## The Value Proposition

Values, in addition to interests, make up the other pillar of foreign policy and here, too, the Arctic provides scope for the Canadian commitments to environmental sustainability and reconciliation with indigenous peoples. Like Brazil with the rainforest, Canada is in possession of a wide expanse of the Arctic, and as Franklyn Griffiths has long eloquently argued, “stewardship” must be an essential component of Canada's Arctic Strategy.<sup>5</sup> This is best done in collaboration with the Inuit and other aboriginal peoples who have

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<sup>5</sup> Griffiths, Franklyn, Huebert, Rob, and Lackenbauer, Whitney P. *Canada and the Changing Arctic: Sovereignty, Security and Stewardship* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2011).



lived in this harsh climate for many millennia. These mutual concerns fused in the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996, one of the most innovative Canadian contributions to international relations in recent years. Responding to Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 call for the Arctic to be a "zone for peace", Finland helped create the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in 1991, and Canada, first under Brian Mulroney, then Jean Chrétien, pushed to expand the concept to become a formal Arctic Council pledged to peace and mutual cooperation (ably assisted by Canadian Arctic Ambassador Mary Simon, now Canada's first Inuit Governor General). The Arctic Council came into being in Ottawa in 1996 with one of its most creative features being the formal inclusion of Inuit and indigenous as "Permanent Participants," a first in international organization.<sup>6</sup> The eight Arctic states created working groups of scientists on a host of Arctic issues, met annually in ministerial sessions, promoted treaties on search and rescue and oil spill prevention, and led the way in alerting the world to the devastating impact of climate change on the Arctic. It has become the most important international organization focusing on the Arctic with great powers like China and India becoming observers and the European Union wishing to do so.

But, as with so much else, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has put the future of the Arctic Council in doubt. Russia is the Arctic superpower and the Arctic Council's particular virtue was that the 7 other members (Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Canada and the United States) could work with Russia on peaceful pursuits. Russia, indeed, was the Council chair when the invasion occurred. The work of the Council was initially paused after the invasion, though recently

work on projects not involving Russia has resumed. Finland and Sweden, however, applied to join the NATO alliance after the Ukraine invasion and a future Arctic Council with 7 members in NATO and a Russia seeing NATO as the enemy will be a very different entity than the Arctic Council which worked so well from 1996 to 2022. Gabriella Gricius of the European Leadership Network has [written cogently](#) about the three options facing a post-Ukraine war Council. First, Russian cooperation could resume but only in the working groups, not at higher levels. Second, simultaneous creation of an Arctic Seven regional organization that excludes Russia. Third, no Arctic Council at all.

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Canada should favour the option of Russian scientists being invited to resume their research in the Council's working groups: our dispute is with the murderous Putin regime after all, not the Russian people. But in the meantime, Canada should step up its work in Arctic research with its fellow Council members and invite new partnerships with the European Union to keep alive the reality and spirit of Arctic cooperation until such time as the Arctic Council resumes full operations.

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<sup>6</sup> Axworthy, Thomas S and Dean, Ryan "Changing the Arctic Paradigm from Cold War to Cooperation: How Canada's Indigenous Leaders Shaped the Arctic Council", *Yearbook of Polar Law*, Volume 5, 2013.



## Conclusion

In both achieving our interests and enhancing our values, the Arctic should be a preeminent priority of Canadian policymaking. Public opinion supports this too: more than a decade ago, the Gordon Foundation [surveyed](#) each of the Arctic Council countries and oversampled in Canada to ensure that one could compare northern and southern respondents. In that era, Canadians rated environmental security as very important (in the 80 to 90% range), with national security ranging from 58% to 45%, while a large plurality, ranging from 51% to 44% favoured diverting military assets from other areas to protect the North. Since that survey, climate change and the Russian threat have only intensified so percentages might be even higher today. If the Government of Canada chose to prioritize a Northern Foreign and Defence policy, it would not be a hard sell – the region forming such an integral part of both national identity and territorial sovereignty.

In 1946, even before the Cold War began, Lester Pearson knew that “there is no isolation—even in the Arctic ice.” What was true then is even more evident today – it is in Canada’s national interest, perhaps even its paramount national interest, to have a secure, thriving, sustainable North.

*This commentary is published as part of IPD’s project, [Canada’s Interests in a Shifting Order](#).*

## About the Author

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