



Canadian Rangers hold down their tent as a CH-149 *Cormorant* takes off during Operation *Nunavut* from the wreck site of Her Majesty's Ship (HMS) *Erebus* that was part of the 1845 Sir John Franklin Arctic expedition, 16 April 2015.

The Militarization of the Arctic: Emerging Reality, Exaggeration, and Distraction

by Adam MacDonald

Adam P. MacDonald is an independent academic regularly getting published in Canadian and international journals. His research interests include Canadian foreign and defence policy with respect to the Arctic and East Asia; political developments in Myanmar specifically pertaining to the military; and Chinese naval modernization. He lives and works in Halifax.

Introduction

With the end of the Cold War and the softening of a geopolitical lensing of the region, a new political paradigm emerged in the Arctic, based upon institutional frameworks supporting and facilitating cooperation on mutual interests and challenges.¹ However, over the past decade, the Arctic potentially is once again at an inflection point with the pendulum swinging back towards a more strategic-military orientation. This is most evident by the augmenting presence, capability development, and employment of military forces by all Arctic-Five (A-5) states;² a phenomenon characterized by some commentators as the 'militarization' of the Arctic.³ These analyses, however, are more of a detailed description and cataloguing of military activities, and they stop short of intensively

investigating their underlying explanatory components. Instead, there is a simple narrative made that militarization stems from an emerging perception in the region that relations are becoming more confrontational and hostile, specifically over contested maritime exclusion zone claims. Opening accessibility and resource potential in the region, it is commonly argued, is driving the latest (and last) great scramble for sovereign control in the world.

The presence of military forces does not in and of itself necessarily signal a shift to more adversarial approaches in diplomacy. Moving beyond descriptive accounts, examination of the use and intentionality of military power in Arctic affairs reveals three distinct trends impacting the regional landscape. First, the increasing training, capability development, stationing and employment of military forces in the North are an *emerging reality*. Second, the current discourse with respect to the militarization of the Arctic *exaggerates* both the military build-up and the intentional underpinning of it. Power projection capabilities of the A-5 states remain limited beyond their own borders, and most training and exercise scenarios are focused within national boundaries developing a broad base of competencies. Furthermore, certain capability developments, although residing within the Arctic, have extra-regional causes. Third, as has been demonstrated by past events, the introduction of military forces into Arctic issues

In addressing these issues, forums, either within existing institutions or in new venues, need to be established. Their purpose is not to dissuade the use of military forces in the Arctic, as they are legitimate power resources, but to explain their political underpinnings and deter employment in regional disagreements. Managing the *selective inclusion*, not *complete exclusion*, of military aspects into the Arctic regime is warranted to support and not derail efforts that address the complex challenges confronting the region.

Emerging Reality

The Arctic is an augmenting strategic priority for the A-5 states. Over the last decade, all of them have promulgated

multi-dimensional strategies that explicitly state that their primary (although not only) interest is exercising sovereignty over their northern territories and achieving other national security interests, including a stable regional order. Furthermore, some, such as the United States and Russia, have created Arctic-specific defence policies. It is evident from these documents that the military emphasis in the region will increase, although there is careful consideration to portray their presence and employment in non-confrontational terms.



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(regardless of their rationales) may alter relations onto a more competitive stance. In this respect, the larger geopolitical relationship between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – of which the other four A-5 states are members – must be carefully addressed to ensure military developments do not become a *distraction* to the continued functioning of the Arctic regional regime. This is particularly relevant within the context of degrading military relations between Moscow and NATO following Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and ongoing turmoil in Eastern Ukraine, issues which may produce negative ripple effects impacting Arctic diplomacy and co-operation.⁴



NORAD/USNORTHCOM photo 2000017151

A relatively recent interception of a Russian Tupolev TU-95 *Bear* bomber by a USAF F-15 *Eagle* from the Alaskan NORAD Region. Relations of late have become more strained and Russian aircraft have resumed their testing of NORAD air defences.



Canada's Northern Strategy, published in 2009, promises to put "...more boots on the Arctic Tundra, more ships in the water, and a better eye in the sky."⁵ Recent Danish defence policies focus upon the changing geo-strategic significance of the Arctic and promulgate the establishment of a new Arctic military command headquartered in Nuuk, Greenland.⁶ Norway's 2007 Soria Moria Declaration asserted that the Arctic is their strategic priority in national defence and led to the associated redeployment of most military headquarters from the south to the north of the country.⁷ Russia's Arctic strategy emphasizes the region as the country's primary area for natural resources by 2020, and the concomitant need for a strong regional military component.⁸ Finally, the

United States, over the past year, has revamped both its Arctic and Arctic Defense policies with plans to become more active and to modernize certain capabilities, such as ice breakers.⁹

Stemming from these policy declarations, all A-5 states have increased their military training, capability development, and employment regionally. Of these, Russia has been the most active, resuming regional naval surface and air patrols in 2007-2008. Furthermore, the planting of the Russian flag at the bottom of the North Pole in 2007 not only stirred sensitivities over ownership of the Arctic, but it demonstrated Moscow's capability advantages vice those of their neighbours. Russia conducted the region's first ever amphibious assault as part of a larger military exercise in 2012 involving over 20,000 soldiers.¹⁰ In September 2013, a ten-ship naval armada made the 2000 nautical-mile journey via the Northern Sea Route from Severomorsk (home to the Russian Northern Fleet) east to the New Siberian Islands in support of refurbishing and opening old military facilities. Furthermore, there are plans to expand these projects to Russia's other northern islands, including Franz Joseph Land and Novaya Zemlya. These developments signal a particular focus upon combat readiness and mobilization.¹¹



The Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker *Henry Larsen* in Allen Bay at Resolute in Nunavut Territory, during an annual joint exercise between the Royal Canadian Navy and the Canadian Coast Guard, 25 August 2010.

Canada has been active on a number of fronts to augment its military presence and experience in the region as well. Since 2007, Canada has conducted annually Operation

Nanook, a multi-service training exercise designed to protect and to exercise capabilities within its Arctic national borders. The continued development of the Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships, although somewhat uncertain of particulars, is a new region-specific capability for the Canadian Navy.¹² Plans for new surveillance systems, including satellites and underwater aspects, further demonstrate Ottawa's determination to increase its monitoring of Arctic movements in its waters.¹³

Also contributing to the regional trend, Denmark has been building its capabilities in the construction and use of naval platforms. The *Thetis*, *Absalon*, and *Ivar Huitfeldt* class frigates are combat capable vessels which are increasingly being used to patrol Greenland's waters. F-16 fighters have also been redeployed to Greenland, a first for the Danish military.¹⁴ Likewise, Norway has built a number of offshore vessels and frigates capable of being equipped with advanced combat systems, such as the American designed *Aegis* air-defence system on their *Fridtjof Nansen* class frigates. Oslo also hosts the bi-annual Exercise *Cold Response*, aimed at increasing operational and survival knowledge in the Arctic. The least active of these countries is the United States, which has largely avoided Arctic specific capability development, but the continued basing of F-22 aircraft in Alaska, and the ice breaking capable *Seawolf* and *Virginia* class nuclear attack submarines, provides Washington options in the region.¹⁵

Current Exaggeration of Arctic Militarization

The actual extent of capabilities and operations of military forces in the Arctic, while growing, is still limited largely to within the A-5 state borders.¹⁶ Even the much-hyped Russian armada in September 2013 occurred during ideal weather conditions, and close to shore.¹⁷ Furthermore, many military exercises, such as *Nanook* and *Cold Response*, occur in the summer months, due to the difficulties of conducting them in the weather extremes, which characterize much of the year.

Procurement and financing issues in building and maintaining such capabilities are also a limitation for some Arctic states. Developing regional expertise and experiences with respect to equipping, training, and stationing forces is a major challenge, and they compete with other military and spending priorities. For example, despite its triumphant tone, some of the procurement and military aspects outlined in Canada's Northern Defence Strategy have not come to fruition, such as the building of a refueling station in Nanisivik. The Arctic offshore patrol vessels (AOPS) are running over time and budget, most likely implying a smaller number will be completed than originally forecasted, and with fewer capabilities,¹⁸ (although a contract was signed with Irving Shipbuilding in January 2015 to manufacture five-to-six AOPS at a total cost of \$3.5 Billion – Ed.). Such budgetary restraints have been explicitly stated within the United States' Arctic Defense Strategy, acknowledging that the current state of fiscal



Her Majesty's Canadian Ship (HMCS) *Summerside* and Her Danish Majesty's Ship *Vaedderen* (foreground) sail in formation off the coast of Nuuk, Greenland, while conducting interoperability exercises during Operation *Nanook*, 6 August 2013.

DND photo HS2013-0001-010 by Master Corporal Holly Canning



Reuters RTXJXAR/Stringer

The Norwegian supply ship *Normand Pioneer*, used to carry a British LR5 deep sea submersible craft to the Barents Sea, after Russia, in the wake of initially resisting foreign assistance, had formally asked Britain and Norway for help in rescuing 118 Russian sailors trapped in the submarine *Kursk* on the seabed in the Barents Sea during August 2000. When Norwegian divers finally entered the shattered hull seven days after the onboard explosion, the *Kursk* was found totally flooded. There were no survivors.



Reuters RTR2WAA/T/Handout

Russian-flagged tanker *Renda* navigates through ice on its way to the Alaskan port of Nome, 13 January 2012.

austerity combined with the American military ‘pivot’ to East Asia may derail their renewed strategic approach in the region.¹⁹ Even Russia, with steadily increasing military budgets, is faced with decades of infrastructure development in some of its harshest and neglected regions.²⁰

Beyond capability gaps and challenges, militarization implies that military developments have come to dominate the regional discourse, driven by changing and augmenting threat perceptions that the future security environment will become more hostile. Such analyses give a parsimonious, mono-casual picture of the forces behind these issues, which are, in reality, varied and interlinked. The growing military focus upon the region by some A-5 states has more to do with the geographic positioning of the country than with an increasingly pessimistic view with respect to future regional cooperation. Norway and Russia have large portions of their states, including ample natural resources, residing in the Arctic, and thus it makes sense in part why they place military emphasis therein. Concerns remain on the part of Norway regarding Russian posturing in the region, but the 2010 agreement by the two settling their dispute over the Barents Sea demonstrates that positive political and legal action and compromise is possible, even in an environment where strategic suspicions exist.²¹

Further, the nature of some military exercises are not simply oriented towards developing combat capable forces, but in building and strengthening governmental capacities within these remote areas. For example, with respect to Canada, Operation *Nanook* conducted in 2013 was devoted to non-warfare scenarios, including evacuations due to natural disasters, coordinating missing person searches, and aviation disaster response. In these, the military operated in a largely

constabulary and support role to other domestic agencies. Furthermore, the inclusion of other A-5 states in such exercises, the United States and Denmark in Operation *Nanook*, and numerous NATO countries in *Cold Response*, demonstrate a desire to coordinate Arctic knowledge and to develop common operating procedures.

Finally, some military developments in the Arctic are based upon larger, extra-regional factors. Having the United States and Russia in the region, given their wider strategic relationship, blurs the lines between developments which are Arctic specific vice those of a more global nature. For example, the placement of interceptor missiles in Alaska by Washington is not designed to counter some Arctic threat, but that of North Korea’s expanding nuclear missile arsenal. The rebuilding of Russia’s Northern Fleet, particularly its nuclear ballistic submarine component, while conducting operations in the Arctic is designed to upgrade Moscow’s largest Fleet for global operations and to shore up its nuclear deterrent.²² Also, the use of multi-role combat naval ships in the region by the smaller A-5 states – Canada, Denmark and Norway – may not be driven by an augmented security posture as much as by necessity, due to the limited availability of platforms. These nations do not have the luxury of regionally defined fleets, leading them to build and use multi-purpose vessels in a variety of global operational theatres.

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A Detrimental Distraction

The only territorial dispute (not to be confused with maritime zone claims) ongoing in the Arctic is that of Hans Island between Canada and Denmark. For years, the debate over this barren rocky island with no population or economic



US Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Star* completes ice drills in the Arctic, 3 July 2013.

Reuters RTX17278/ US Coast Guard



Hans Island, as seen from the air, with Ellesmere Island in the background.

resources was low key and non-threatening. All this changed in 2003 with the introduction of naval vessels by both sides to the island, alongside planting national flags and visits by senior government officials, which stifled relations and greatly antagonized the issue onto a zero-sum geopolitical grounding.²³ A 2005 agreement was reached by Ottawa and Copenhagen in New York to cease the regular military visits to the island and to return to the status-quo: one of dispute, but now of low political importance.²⁴ This is perhaps the greatest demonstration of the manner in which the introduction of military forces, regardless of the underlying intent, can generate hostility and tensions, creating a chain reaction of ‘tit-for-tat’ uses of military power greatly inflaming what was historically a non-issue between the two nations. Therefore, with the increasing presence of military forces in the region, the potential remains for them to become a detrimental distraction away from the needed regional cooperation and engagement to tackle the plethora of real and complex challenges at hand.

All A-5 states must continue to clearly define their rationale for the employment of military forces to the North, but it is the lack of clarity regarding Russia’s geopolitical perception which generates the most concern. A 2013 study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies concluded the Russian military was not prepared to ‘repel aggression’ in the region.²⁵ The unclear threat in this circumstance was further clouded when, a day after Canada submitted its official United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) exclusion zone claim (including the North Pole), President Putin ordered the Russian military to redouble its efforts in the Arctic, making the region a military priority.²⁶ As

a result of the timings of such a move, it is uncertain how Russia will incorporate and utilize its growing military power in the Arctic. Will it be employed for exercising authority and defence within its territories, or for supporting regional political and economic claims, perhaps in a confrontational manner?

Russian perceptions, however, also stem from their wider relationship with the United States and NATO. Moscow is concerned with respect to NATO’s growing interest in the region, especially since the other A-5 states are all alliance members. Therefore, individual, uncoordinated, and national specific military actions by them may be interpreted as a larger, intentional NATO strategy, altering the balance of power at the expense of Russia.²⁷ NATO and its Arctic members must be mindful and empathetic to such strategic suspicion. Russia is an outlier in Arctic military cooperation, as the other A-5 members are increasingly working together via military exercises. In particular, Canada and Denmark, in the wake of the early-2000s flare-up over Hans Island, have developed a strong military connection with regular exercises, exchanges, and port visits between their navies and coast guard forces. However, even within NATO, there is disagreement with respect to the organization’s future involvement. Norway advocates it would positively contribute to regional security, but Canada is wary that non-Arctic members in the alliance would get an unfair voice in the region at the expense of the Arctic states.²⁸

Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and ongoing unrest in the Ukraine has cast a chill in military and strategic relations between Moscow and NATO, which threatens to spill over into the Arctic region. NATO states have committed military forces to

Canadian Geographic 2005, re-drawn by 17 Wing Publishing Office Winnipeg



to any NATO role in the region, coincidentally congruent (but for different reasons) with Russia's position. However, tensions in Canada-Russia relations may motivate Ottawa to reconsider such a stance.²⁹

So far, the 'ripple effect' in strategic relations with Moscow has not dramatically impacted the Arctic regional regime, with member states publicly stating their desire to keep regional relations separate from others around the world. That said, Ottawa's boycott of the April 2014 Arctic Council meeting in Moscow demonstrates how the region is not hermetically sealed from disputes and tensions with respect to other aspects of the Arctic states' relations.³⁰ It also remains unclear whether a

Europe for training and 'presence operation' purposes, shoring up support for NATO's Eastern European members wary of a more assertive and potentially militarily aggressive Russia. However, due to the geopolitical realities of European dependence upon Russia for natural gas, the intensity and commitment of these responses varies by NATO states, with Germany and France remaining largely mute on the matter, but Canada being the most vocally critical of the Putin regime. Further, NATO members are trying to determine whether territorial aggrandizement in Crimea is a product of regional specific factors, or a new direction in Russian foreign policy which may impact how Moscow conducts its Arctic affairs. Norway, for example, is increasingly calling upon NATO to focus and establish an alliance regional presence to counteract such a potentiality, but Canada remains concerned with respect

NATO presence in the Arctic would stabilize or inflame relations, placing the region on a more confrontational military setting with extra-regional issues increasingly influencing Arctic policies and diplomacy.

The potential for security dilemmas and arms races in the Arctic is not only an academic observation, but one explicitly acknowledged by some of the regional actors, including the United States and Canada. In Washington's Arctic Defense Strategy, for example, it states: "Being too aggressive in taking steps to address anticipated future security risks may create the conditions of mistrust and miscommunication under which such risks could materialize."³¹ The universal agreement by the A-5 states that security matters exist in the region, and that military forces



DND photo HS2013-0010-004 by Master Corporal Helly Ganning

Her Majesty's Canadian Ship *Summerside* sails off the coast east of Talbot Inlet, Nunavut, during Operation *Nanook 13*, 17 August 2013.

DND photo GD2014-0542-134 by Master Corporal Johanie Maheu



Members of the Canada Border Services Agency, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Royal Canadian Navy, Nunavut Coroner's Office, and Transportation and Safety Board are transported to a simulated cruise ship grounding at York Sound, Nunavut Territory, during a search and rescue exercise as part of Operation Nanook 14, 27 August 2014.

Inclusion, not Exclusion, of Military Issues

These military developments exist within an Arctic regime populated by institutional frameworks which have been emerging since the 1990s. Of these, the Arctic Council is the premier institute, bringing together all eight Arctic countries (the A-5 states plus Iceland, Finland and Sweden) along with a number of northern community groups, in establishing forums to address a number of transnational issues, such as: increasing economic activity and shipping; indigenous communities; mapping and surveying; and the overall sources and impact of climate change to the region. Security matters- specifically those pertaining to military developments – are barred from the institution's mandate.³² However, the A-5 states have constructed other avenues over the past number of years to address some of these concerns.

The 2008 Ilusissat Declaration signed by all A-5 states proclaims the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the legal framework of the region and the instrument through which their conflicting exclusion zone claims shall be concluded and governed. Over the past decade, maritime disputes – including exclusion zone claims and the legal status of major transport routes – have augmented in priority for the A-5 states as the increasing accessibility and potential resource

can be employed in part to address them, must be balanced by the challenges of how to use them in a manner which does not in and of itself cause unnecessary hostility and tensions, ultimately inhibiting the ability to address the issues they were originally designed to combat.



Reuters: RTR430J8/Chris Wattle

Canada's Prime Minister Harper stands on the front deck of HMCS Kingston on Eclipse Sound near the Arctic community of Pond Inlet in Nunavut Territory, 24 August 2014.



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profitability motivates them to secure access and control to the furthest extent. As a result, competitive arenas, largely absent in the 1990s, are beginning to emerge. This is not surprising or unexpected, but the manner in which these competitions, including those conducted between close allies such as Canada and the United States over the status of the Northwest Passage unfold will have major ramifications to the wider regional relationship, especially since final adjudication on many of these issues will not be forthcoming any time soon.

The creation of the annual meeting of Northern Defence Chiefs in 2012, attended by senior military officers of the Arctic states, has to date been the most substantive endeavour to include military issues into the regional framework. However, these meetings, while discussing common security interests and solutions, avoid raising matters that are contested between the aforementioned states. There remains, therefore, the need to include, not just senior military officers, but political and defence officials to discuss the strategic and political dimensions driving their current policies and actions. Reforming existing or establishing new venues to create this diplomatic space would assist in easing misunderstandings and also create mechanisms to address tensions and uncertainties. Allowing members to voice strategic concerns, for example, Russian concern with respect to a greater NATO interest in the region, would contribute towards providing meaningful levels of security to all Arctic states.

Conclusion

The Arctic regional regime and its membership must create room for the *inclusion*, not *exclusion*, of military matters. Military forces are a valid and needed resource, particularly as they are possibly the only government organization with the

capability to operate in the harsh regional environment and to provide services such as search and rescue and human and natural disaster assistance. The stationing and establishing of military units and centres may also be useful as logistics and transportation hubs, and could create much needed regional infrastructure which can be used for other purposes, such as for shipping.³³

The inability or unwillingness to include and address military matters permits the danger that the augmenting use of military power, regardless of its original purpose, leads to the militarization of the region. To that end, the reasons for their employment changes from addressing national and transnational issues – search and rescue, maritime and aviation disasters, and possibly illegal activities, such as smuggling and terrorism – to that of responding to the military designs and initiatives of each other. It is not clear that it is changing threat perceptions which are driving current military developments, but it is accurate to predict that their increasing presence may result in changing threat perceptions if they are not addressed in an open, transparent, and reciprocal manner.

Explaining the presence of combat capable forces in the region, acknowledging extra-regional influences upon military developments, and deterring any use of naval and air patrols over contested exclusion zone claims are the most immediate military-diplomatic challenges which confront regional leaders. In the end, the overarching objective is to ensure that the regional security discourse is not dominated by traditional balance of power calculations, the territorialisation of the Arctic Ocean, and boasts of sovereign pride compromising the cooperative and multilateral approaches that have been established to address transnational issues, which demand a coordinated, region-wide response.



NOTES

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10. Singh.
11. Drennan.
12. Rob Huebert, "The Newly Emerging Arctic Security Environment," *The Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute*, March 2010, p. 7. Available at www.cdfai.org/PDF/The%20Newly%20Emerging%20Arctic%20Security%20Environment.pdf. Accessed 10 January 2014.
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14. Wezeman, p. 5.
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16. Katarzyna Zysk, "The Evolving Arctic Security Environment: An Assessment," in *Russia in the Arctic*, Stephen J. Blank (ed.), pp. 91-138. Available at www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=131240. Accessed 10 January 2014; Wezeman.
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DND photo HS42-2015-0273-028 by Master Seaman Peter Reed

A CC-138 *Twin Otter* drops off gear at the HMS *Erebus* wreck site from the Sir John Franklin expedition during Operation *Nunavut*, 9 April 2015.