

Navigating the Geopolitics of the United States, China, and Russia on Maritime Security in the Arctic

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Issue

Canada requires a strong foreign policy to manage the maritime security competition between the United States, China, and Russia in the Arctic region to ensure Canada's interests are protected.

Background

Competing interests and powers in the Arctic are likely to exacerbate militarization within the region. Unfortunately, there is a lack of institutional strength amongst Arctic States and Communities to tackle hard security matters. The leading multilateral institution in the region is the Arctic Council, a forum established in 1996 to promote cooperation between Arctic States. Full membership includes all eight Arctic states (Canada, Russia, United States, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland), with permanent participation given to six indigenous groups. Currently, there are 13 Non-Arctic States given observer status who can attend Council meetings. However, these states have no voting rights. The mandate of the Arctic Council is to “provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues, in particular issues of sustainable development and environmental protection

in the Arctic” (Arctic Council 1996). The mandate's emphasis on sustainable development and environmental protection are noteworthy given that the Arctic Council specifically excludes military matters. This was done to prevent conflict related politics muddling their efforts and to promote peaceful activities in the Arctic. While the Arctic Council has been highly successful in their efforts, the militarization of the Arctic is still ongoing. In an effort to engage in dialogue regarding hard security matters the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable was established. While originally beneficial, this informal roundtable lacks the institutional strength to manage the complex geopolitics of the region. For example, Russian membership was rejected following their annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Zandee and Kruijver 2020). It also excludes indigenous communities from the discussion despite these populations being most likely to be impacted by increased military activity in the region. With this lack of institutional strength to tackle hard security issues, there are fears that an Arctic Cold War will form in the future. Central to these concerns is China, who following their admittance to the Arctic Council as an observer in 2013, quickly established their presence as a major player in the region's geopolitics (Bennett 2015).

Considering themselves a “Near-Arctic State” China believes it is within their rights to participate in Arctic discourse, policy, and research along with the benefits it

has to offer (People's Republic of China 2018). In 2018, Beijing released a white paper articulating their policy positions and intentions with the Arctic (People's Republic of China 2018). This plan involves five comprehensive policy stances:

- deepening the exploration and understanding of the Arctic;
- protecting the eco-environment of the Arctic and addressing climate change;
- utilizing Arctic Resources in a Lawful and Rational Manner;
- participating Actively in Arctic governance and international cooperation;
- promoting peace and stability in the Arctic.

These policies specifically outline China's intention to create a "Polar Silk Road" through developing infrastructure for Arctic shipping routes and promoting development of Arctic resources. While the Chinese Arctic Policy promotes peace and cooperation, past Chinese scholarship and intermittent official posture have reflected a more belligerent position on neutrality with Arctic matters (Canadian Security Intelligence Service 2013; Jakobson 2010; Lasserre 2010). One scholar, Guo Peiqin, declared that "any country that lacks comprehensive research on Polar politics will be excluded from being a decisive power in the management of the Arctic and therefore be forced into a passive position" (Jakobson 2010, 7). Han Xudong, a People's Liberation Army Senior Colonel, warned that the use of force cannot be ruled out when it comes to the complex disputes of sovereignty in the Arctic (Jakobson 2010).

To support its fast-growing industry, China has become a significant investor in resource extraction worldwide and has shown a strong interest in the Canadian Arctic. This was demonstrated by a recent attempt to purchase a gold mine in Nunavut (Oddleifson, Alton, & Romaniuk 2021). China's resource development falls in line with Beijing's published Arctic Policy which aims to develop the necessary infrastructure for a 'Polar Silk Road' as the region becomes more accessible for economic development and trade (People's Republic of China 2018). Arctic States led by the United States, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, however, have raised concerns over China's involvement in the region (Lackenbauer et al. 2018). Citing China's pattern of aggressive behaviour in the South China and

East China Seas, these states believe China is a threat to any rule-based international order in the Arctic. Canada, Russia and the United States, being the major military powers in the Arctic, will need to effectively maneuver through the complex geopolitics generated by China's newfound presence to prevent future conflict.

Likely in response to China's Arctic Policy, the United States Department of Defense provided an updated report to the United States Congress on the state's continued invested interests and goals in the Arctic. Working within the National Defense Strategy, the United States Department of Defense outlined their Arctic objectives as including:

- Defend the homeland;
- compete when necessary to maintain favorable regional balances of power; and
- ensure common domains remain free and open.

While China's Arctic Policy highlights cooperation and peace, the United States prioritizes security and defence (Konyshev & Sergunin 2017). The United States believes that the Arctic is a potential target for outside actors due to its strategic value and has recognized that states like Russia and China provide 'discrete and different challenges in their respective regions' (Department of Defense, 2019). With continued uncertainty in the Arctic, states including the United States and Russia will remain sensitive towards hostile action and any violation of the rules based order in the Arctic (Konyshev & Sergunin 2017). This has also translated into concern that China will accumulate influence in the region while undermining international rules and norms.

The United States continues to be wary of China's Arctic strategies, specifically around the 'Polar Silk Road'. To protect their northern interests, the United States enhanced their Navy's Second Fleet to operate more visibly in the Arctic along with re-establishing a naval facility in Keflavik, Iceland (a site the United States abandoned in 2006). The United States Coast Guard also finalised long-delayed plans to construct new ice-breakers to replace their two aging vessels (Magowan & Schaik 2019).

The geopolitics of the Arctic are further complicated by Russia. In 1997, Russia and China made a "Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order" in opposition to the

dominance of the United States on the global stage (United Nations 1997). Since then, China and Russia have worked closely, particularly on military strategy, with joint exercises beginning in 2005 and maritime exercises in 2012. Increased Sino-Russian cooperation poses a challenge to the geopolitical arena of the Arctic, particularly when considering Russian activities in the region. Since 2007, Russia has heavily re-prioritized the Arctic, reopening 50 Soviet era bases and facilities and expanding their ice-breaker fleet to over 40 ships (Melino & Conley 2020). The goals of the Russian military presence in the Arctic include:

- enhance homeland defense, specifically a forward line of defense against foreign incursion as the Arctic attracts increased international investment;
- secure Russia's economic future; and
- create a staging ground to project power, primarily in the North Atlantic.

This posturing exacerbates concerns by the United States that they need to continue developing their own Arctic military presence. Thus far, China and Russia have yet to sign any treaties that specifically address military cooperation in the Arctic and the process may be slow-going due to their competing interests (Melino & Conley 2020, Oddleifson, Alton, & Romaniuk 2021). This may lead to the Sino-Russian relationship being strained or coming into conflict.

Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework aims to establish a rules-based international order in the Arctic along with ensuring that the Canadian Arctic and its people are safe, secure and well defended. Canada's ability to detect and monitor territorial incursions and to enforce sovereign claims over its Arctic territory is imperative to this effort (Mitchell 2020). As well, given Inuit interests, sovereignty over resources in the North could have a significant impact on the political structure of this region, especially as the Canadian government has recognized new governance powers to Nunavut. Compared to the United States, Russia, and China, Canada has a relatively small military and thus it is imperative for Canada to rely on other strategies and actors to ensure its policy goals are achieved. Moreover, the complex web of policies and interests in the arctic region highlighted above, raise the risk of Canadian arctic interests being compromised by other states, particularly with the entrance of China as a major actor.

The United States and China are, respectively, Canada's largest and second largest trading partners (Sarty, 2020). As Canada's largest trading partners, conflict between these two superpowers has the potential to jeopardize Canada's political and economic interests. Canada and the United States share the world's largest border and a historically strong partnership and China's rapid industrialization makes for a promising partner in Arctic research and economic development (Havnes & Seland 2019, Lackenbauer et al. 2018). Russia and Canada also constitute the two largest borders contiguous to the Arctic. Therefore a robust diplomatic relationship between the two countries is imperative in maintaining effective governance across the region.

Policy Relevance

With the fears of an Arctic Cold War, some of the current scholarship believes the existing multilateral institutions in the Arctic are not adequate to deal with hard security matters around militarization (Bader, Radoveneanu, and Ragab-Hassen 2011; Zandee and Kruijver 2020). The Arctic Council, for example, excludes military activity from its mandate. A similar critique is made of the International Maritime Organization. NATO is a defensive alliance and is perceived by Moscow to be antagonistic to Russia. The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable is NATO-centric and Russia has been excluded from the roundtable since 2014 following its annexation of Crimea. Finally the Arctic Coast Guard Forum primarily deals with soft security matters. For Canada to effectively maneuver through the Arctic geopolitics imposed by China, it is clear that the growing militarization of the Arctic needs to be addressed. This is especially relevant as Russia, in a 2021 Arctic Council meeting, has asked to reconvene the Arctic states in talks between these countries' Armed Forces (Jonassen 2021).

As such we propose two paths forward for Canada: (1) cooperation between Canada, the United States, China, and Russia, and (2) deterrence of Chinese and Russian military activity.

Recommendations

1. **Canada should develop and innovate a hard security framework that is independent from the Arctic Council.** With the lack of a formal political framework which centers around hard security matters in the Arctic there is an opportunity to institute a forum that promotes cooperation and inclusion. Fortunately, the Arctic Council provides a suitable framework due to its inclusion of all Arctic States, Indigenous Groups, and invested Observers. While the Arctic Council is reluctant to discuss hard security matters and excludes them from its mandate, the growing militarization in the Arctic cannot and should not be ignored. We propose a formal 'Arctic Security Council' which would discuss strategic military cooperation with the goal of mending relations between competing interests whilst also managing future hard security matters. This council would replicate the framework of the Arctic Council including its institutional structure and membership. While this council would constitute the membership of the Arctic Council, it would run independently from the Arctic Council and draw both diplomatic and military resources from each member state. The goal is to maintain the integrity of the primary Arctic Council but to have a separate formal forum to discuss hard security matters. Although China is only an observer to the Arctic Council, its status as a great power would warrant an invitation to this subsidiary council. As a whole this could serve as a crucial tool to pursue cooperation and collaboration amongst global actors in the Arctic as more actors continue to have invested interest in the region.
2. **Canada should work collaboratively with Russia in promoting security dialogue in the Arctic.** As the incoming chair of the Arctic Council in 2021 Russia has stated their interest in reviving military dialogue between Arctic States. Canada should work cooperatively with Russia in developing the 'Arctic Security Council' recommended above. This would serve to demonstrate Canada's willingness to cooperate with Russia on Arctic affairs but also represent a symbolic notion of cooperation among member states in regards to military matters and reaffirm efforts to secure and maintain good governance in the Arctic. It is possible, given that Russia is urging a renewal of a security dialogue and

positive relations within the military sphere (Jonassen 2021), that further cooperation among Arctic States and Indigenous Permanent Participants may be possible (Arctic Council 2021).

3. **Canada should work with our closest Allies in the Arctic to form an informal forum that is modeled after the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or 'Quad'.** The Quad is an informal security and strategic 'dialogue' that is maintained by four countries with interests in the Indo-Pacific region (Australia, the United States, India, and Japan). To date, cooperation has largely manifested itself in the form of joint naval exercises and coordinated diplomatic responses (predominantly addressing Chinese behavior in the region). The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable is the contemporary institutional security framework in the Arctic. However, this current ecosystem lacks the strategic cooperation that the 'Quad' embodies. One potential remedy to this is to imitate an Arctic 'Quad' with joint military exercises between the United States, Canada, and other members of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable.
4. **Canada should use the formation of an Arctic Quad as a deterrent to Chinese and Russian aggression.** An Arctic 'Quad' can be an expanded multilateral approach beyond the current military to military forum to ensure Canada's interests are met. The military-to-military feature can be complemented with a coordinated diplomatic and strategic dialogue with states in the liberal international order. Secondly, the joint exercise of military and naval training missions can act as a deterrent to Chinese and Russian aggression in the region. Establishing a security dialogue for the region with the United States, Norway, France, the Netherlands, the UK and Canada balances the appearance of a hard power approach to security in the Arctic.

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