
**ARCTIC:
NEW REGION OF WORLD POLICY**

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CANADA'S ARCTIC SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY

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Abstract. The Arctic region has transitioned from a peripheral geographic space to a critical arena of escalating strategic significance in the 21st century. This transformation is primarily driven by the profound and multi-faceted impacts of climate change, which are enhancing the accessibility of the Arctic landscape and its adjacent maritime zones. The receding ice cover is not only opening up novel opportunities for the exploitation of previously inaccessible abundant natural resources, including hydrocarbons and critical minerals, but is also facilitating the intensification of maritime traffic along the Northern Sea Route. Furthermore, the prospect of the Northwest Passage emerging as a viable and potentially shorter alternative for global trade routes is attracting increasing attention from major global economic actors. These converging environmental and technological shifts are catalyzing a notable surge in geopolitical competition within the Arctic. This escalating competition underscores the imperative for robust international cooperation frameworks and the concurrent need for Arctic states to bolster their respective national capacities to safeguard their interests and contribute to regional stability. Within this evolving geopolitical landscape, Canada occupies a distinct and pivotal position as a prominent Arctic power. Characterized by extensive territorial claims spanning vast land and maritime domains, Ottawa bears significant responsibilities in the stewardship and governance of the Arctic. Consequently, Canada has articulated and actively pursues a many-sided Arctic policy designed to address the complex security and defense challenges inherent in this dynamic environment. This policy framework encompasses a dual-pronged approach: firstly, the proactive diversification of engagement modalities within the international arena, seeking to foster collaborative relationships with other Arctic and non-Arctic stakeholders to promote regional stability and address shared challenges; and secondly, the implementation of concrete domestic measures aimed at enhancing Canada's national defense capabilities in the Arctic, ensuring its capacity to effectively monitor and protect its sovereign interests in this increasingly contested space. This paper examines the nuances of Canada's Arctic policy within the broader context of intensifying geopolitical competition, analyzing the strategic rationales and practical implications of its dual-pronged approach to regional security and defense.

Keywords: Canada, Arctic, Foreign Policy, Security, Defense, Militarization, Russia, China, NATO, NORAD, International Cooperation.

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АРКТИЧЕСКАЯ ПОЛИТИКА КАНАДЫ В СФЕРЕ ОБЕСПЕЧЕНИЯ БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ И ОБОРОНЫ

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Аннотация. Значение Арктического региона все больше возрастает. Повышение его доступности, климатические изменения, активный интерес к природным ресурсам и стратегическим транспортным коридорам (Северный морской путь и Северо-Западный проход) усиливают межгосударственную конкуренцию в Арктике. В этих условиях Канада как ключевой арктический актор реализует многовекторную политику, направленную на обеспечение безопасности и суверенитета, посредством активизации международного взаимодействия и наращивания собственного оборонного потенциала.

Ключевые слова: Канада, Арктика, внешняя политика, безопасность, оборона, милитаризация, Россия, Китай, НАТО, НОРАД, международное сотрудничество.

INTRODUCTION

The Arctic region has long remained on the fringes of global politics and has historically been characterized by a low level of conflict, with scientific cooperation and environmental protection dominating the international agenda. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, the region is undergoing a period of rapid transformation and is coming to the fore. This shift is driven by several interrelated factors, including climate change, the opening of new sea routes, access to abundant natural resources, and the increasing geopolitical interest of the world's leading powers.

Once viewed as a zone of stability and cooperation, the Arctic is now becoming an arena of potential competition and even confrontation. This requires key players to rethink their approaches to security and international cooperation in the region. Canada – with its vast territory, extensive coastline, strategically important geographical position, and substantial Arctic population – occupies a special place in this changing geopolitical landscape. The Arctic holds great significance for Canada's identity, economy, and national security. Its Arctic policy is of paramount importance not only for the country itself, but also for regional and international stability. The priorities that define Canadian Arctic policy include ensuring sovereignty, protecting the environment, promoting sustainable development in the region, supporting Indigenous peoples, and encouraging international cooperation.

In recent years, Canada's Arctic policy has been shaped amid growing geopolitical tensions, which have fundamentally altered the context of regional interaction. Russia's strengthened military presence and increasingly assertive Arctic policy – particularly in light of deteriorating relations with the West since 2014 – have become key factors affecting the balance of power. Meanwhile, China's influence is growing as it asserts its “near-Arctic” interests and actively invests in regional infrastructure and economic projects. The escalation of tensions between Moscow and NATO following the intensification of the Ukrainian conflict in 2022 prompted Ottawa to revise its strategic documents. Beginning in March 2022, the Standing Senate Committee on National Security, Defence and Veterans Affairs conducted research, the results

of which were published in June 2023 in a report entitled “*Arctic Security Under Threat*” [source 1]. Most of the report's key findings were reflected in the updated 2024 defense strategy [source 2], and later in the strategic document “*Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*” [source 3]. The Arctic has increasingly come to be viewed as a space of potential confrontation. As a result, security and defense issues have moved to the forefront of Canada's Arctic policy.

In this context, the Canadian scientific community has demonstrated growing interest in Arctic-related issues [1]. In recent years, key research topics have included Canada's defense strategy [2] and its relations with Russia and China; new technologies for surveillance and mobility in Arctic conditions [source 4]; challenges in implementing a comprehensive approach to regional security, encompassing not only military aspects but also human security and the sustainability of local communities [source 3]; issues of U.S.-Canadian regional cooperation [3], including in the field of Arctic defense [4]; and various aspects of the modernization of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and its role in ensuring Arctic security [5].

In Russian scholarship, significant contributions to the study of the military and non-military aspects of Canadian Arctic policy have been made by N. Vyakhireva, whose works focus on regional Canadian-American interaction [6] and the assessment of risks and threats in Ottawa's defense strategies [7]. Another notable work is the monograph by D. Volodin, which offers a comprehensive history of various Canadian government policies aimed at protecting sovereignty in the Arctic territories [8]. Russian experts also pay considerable attention to the analysis of official documents. For example, I. Strelnikova has examined the objectives outlined in Canada's Arctic strategy, including its ambition to play a more prominent role in managing the region and establishing relations with most sub-Arctic states [9].

This paper aims to analyze Canada's foreign policy in the context of the evolving geopolitical reality in the Arctic. The author seeks to address the following questions: What role does Canada play in ensuring Arctic security amid growing Russian and Chinese influence and rising tensions be-

tween Russia and NATO? How are international military cooperation and Canada's presence in the region being implemented, particularly within the frameworks of NORAD and NATO? What is Canada's position on the militarization of the Arctic in the current environment?

GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES IN THE ARCTIC: NEW CHALLENGES FOR CANADA

Canada's traditional Arctic policy, which has long emphasized scientific cooperation and environmental protection, is currently under significant pressure due to changing geopolitical circumstances. Russia's increased military presence in the region is viewed by Ottawa as a platform for projecting power [source 5]. The Russian Federation is actively restoring and modernizing Soviet-era military bases located along the entire Arctic coastline, including the islands of the Arctic Archipelago. These facilities include airfields, ports, radar stations, and air defense systems [10]. This significantly enhances Russia's ability to control air and sea space and to deploy military forces in the region if necessary. Moreover, large-scale military exercises demonstrate Russia's capability to rapidly deploy troops and conduct complex operations under challenging Arctic conditions.

Canada perceives these activities not only as a show of force but also as a potential threat to its sovereignty and security. Of particular concern are Russia's possible intentions to dominate key Arctic sea routes – such as the Northern Sea Route – and to expand its influence over regional resources [source 3].

Meanwhile, China's interest in the Arctic is also increasing. Although not geographically part of the region, China designated itself a "Near-Arctic State" in 2018 [source 6] and has actively sought to expand its presence and influence. During a visit to Australia in 2014, Xi Jinping even referred to China as a "polar great power" [source 7]. While Canada's new strategic document notes that China's activities in the Arctic are currently predominantly non-military in nature, these activities are causing growing concern among Canadian policymakers.

The PRC is investing heavily in Arctic projects, including those related to energy, transportation, and infrastructure [11]. Chinese companies are developing natural gas fields in Yamal and are involved in projects aimed at developing the Northern Sea Route and building port infrastructure [12]. The scale of China's economic activity – and its potential long-term impact on regional dynamics – is raising questions in Ottawa. For example, China's participation in the Yamal LNG project has established it as a major player on the Russian Arctic shelf. Additionally, Beijing is actively promoting scientific research in the Arctic, establishing research stations and conducting expeditions. Chinese scientists are engaged in studies related to climate, oceanography, biology, and other disciplines. Meanwhile, the number of Chinese icebreakers and research vessels operating in the Arctic continues to grow [source 8], which the Canadian government also interprets as a sign of China's expanding presence.

The strategic partnership between China and Russia is deepening. Their joint military exercises, coordinated positions in international organizations, and growing economic cooperation – particularly amid worsening relations between both countries and the West [13] – have contributed to the suspension of many formats of multilateral dialogue, including those within the Arctic Council. Under these circumstances, Canada has been forced to adapt by intensifying cooperation with its allies and developing new approaches to engagement with Russia and China.

KEY COOPERATION FORMATS

Acknowledging the limitations of its own resources to effectively control and defend its vast Arctic territories, Canada relies on multilateral cooperation frameworks, primarily within NORAD and NATO. In parallel, Canada is also working to strengthen its national military capabilities. Bilateral cooperation with the United States remains a fundamental element of Canadian Arctic policy, allowing Canada to effectively coordinate efforts with a powerful ally and share the burden of defending extensive northern regions. The cornerstone of this cooperation is NORAD. Established in 1958, NORAD is a unique binational military command responsible for detecting and respond-

ing to air, space, and maritime threats, as well as for controlling North American airspace. Its commander is appointed alternately from among American and Canadian generals, with the deputy commander coming from the other country. This structure symbolizes an equal partnership and deep military integration between the two nations. Ottawa is actively involved in operational planning, force allocation, and decision-making within the Command.

Within NORAD, the Canadian side is directly responsible for the air and space defense of its territory, including the vast Arctic region. The country's armed forces allocate significant resources to provide fighter aircraft, radar systems, naval vessels, and ground units. In particular, Canadian CF-18 multi-role fighter jets regularly patrol Arctic airspace as part of NORAD missions, intercepting and escorting foreign military aircraft approaching North American airspace.

To adapt to new challenges, both countries are modernizing their defense structures, including those operating in the Arctic. This includes developing and deploying new generations of long-range radar systems capable of detecting air and sea targets at great distances, such as over-the-horizon radars and satellite surveillance systems [source 2]. Efforts are also underway to enhance communication and command systems, and to modernize fighter aircraft, including the consideration of replacing the CF-18 with more advanced models. A key aspect of the modernization involves improving NORAD's ability to detect and track cruise missiles and hypersonic weapons.

Canada and the United States regularly conduct joint military exercises and operations in the Arctic to enhance operational compatibility and readiness to respond to regional security challenges. These exercises also serve to demonstrate their presence and commitment to defending their sovereignty in the region's complex environment. Activities include both aerospace (target interception, airspace patrols) and maritime (joint maritime patrols, search and rescue) operations. For example, from January 28 to February 11, 2025, Canada and the U.S. conducted exercises in Greenland under the auspices of NORAD [14]. Canadian military personnel also participate in U.S.-led exercises, such as *Arctic Forge* in Finland and Norway [15].

These operations also involve Canadian Ranger units, whose participation strengthens the effective use of local knowledge and expertise in ensuring Arctic security.

In addition to NORAD, other bilateral agreements between Canada and the U.S. contribute to Arctic security. The 1988 Arctic Cooperation Agreement addresses the Northwest Passage and establishes mechanisms for practical cooperation, despite ongoing legal disputes over its status [source 9]. A joint working group has also been established to address the maritime border in the Beaufort Sea, demonstrating both countries' commitment to resolving border issues through negotiation [16].

Although NATO does not have a direct mandate to ensure security in the Arctic (as the alliance's geographic area of responsibility does not formally extend there), the region is becoming increasingly important to NATO in the context of its broader strategy of collective security and deterrence against Russia [source 10]. As a founding and active member of NATO, Canada plays a prominent role in the Arctic dimension of the alliance's activities.

Historically, Ottawa has demonstrated some restraint regarding NATO's involvement in the region. However, a shift in its position has been observed in recent years. Investments in the modernization of NORAD directly contribute to strengthening the alliance's defense capabilities [17]. Canada has also committed to increasing its defense spending to 2% of GDP in line with NATO requirements [18]. It actively raises Arctic security issues within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty, aiming to draw allies' attention to Russia's growing military activity and the potential threats it poses to the alliance [source 11]. Canadian experts advocate for strengthening NATO's analytical focus on the Arctic, regularly discussing relevant topics in meetings of the North Atlantic Council and other formats, and promoting the development of an adapted regional strategy [source 12]. Canadian representatives emphasize that Arctic security is inseparably linked to broader Euro-Atlantic security and argue that NATO cannot overlook developments in the region.

Ottawa also participates in NATO military exercises held in and near the Arctic. These exercises are designed to enhance interoperability in northern environments and to demonstrate solidarity and readiness for collective defense. For instance, from March 3 to 14, 2025, NATO's Arctic exercises brought together Canada, Norway, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States [source 13].

Nevertheless, Canada's position remains balanced and cautious, as it strives to avoid the uncontrolled militarization of the Arctic and an escalation of regional tensions. The government maintains that NATO's military presence in the region should be defensive and proportionate, while also preserving channels for limited dialogue with Russia. Environmental concerns and the rights of Indigenous peoples are of paramount importance to Canada, and the government seeks to respect and incorporate these priorities into its Arctic policy.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has resulted in the formation of the alliance's "Arctic Seven," opening new opportunities for expanded cooperation and greater operational compatibility between Canada and its Scandinavian allies (Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, and Sweden). At the NATO summit in Washington in July 2024, an agreement was reached on collaboration in icebreaker construction under the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort (ICEPact) initiative [source 14]. In November of the same year, Canada, the United States, and Finland signed a memorandum of understanding formalizing the initiative.

The primary goal of this agreement is to enhance cooperation in the design, construction, and maintenance of Arctic and polar icebreakers. Ottawa views this project as a response to growing challenges and geopolitical competition, particularly in light of increased Russian and Chinese activity. The initiative is intended to demonstrate the Western allies' commitment to consolidating their presence in the Arctic, addressing the existing technological gap, and asserting their influence in the region. Strengthening Canada's icebreaker fleet is essential to ensuring a robust presence and protecting national sovereignty. The project is expected to significantly accelerate the construction

of new vessels. Ottawa has already placed orders for two polar icebreakers [source 14], and cooperation with Washington and Helsinki is expected to support more effective implementation of these plans. However, protectionist policies under the Trump administration have created obstacles to full cooperation and the fair distribution of contracts.

Another important initiative is the Strategic Dialogue between Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden on Arctic security issues [source 15]. This dialogue aims to strengthen cooperation among Arctic NATO members, counter the proliferation of dual-use technologies, address concerns about foreign investment, and discuss broader Arctic security and development issues. The first meeting of the participating countries took place from September 27 to 29, 2024, in New York (USA) and Iqaluit (Canada). Particular attention was given to Indigenous issues and coordinated joint actions. In addition to this multilateral format, Canada is also deepening its bilateral engagement with northern countries. The rapid ratification of Finland and Sweden's NATO applications, along with the opening of a Canadian consulate in Nuuk (Greenland, Denmark), demonstrate Canada's commitment to developing strong ties and intensifying dialogue.

Canada already cooperates with these countries in intelligence collection and analysis and is engaged in joint research and technological collaboration in areas relevant to Arctic defense, such as operations in extreme cold and maritime surveillance. These efforts contribute to improved situational awareness and enable coordinated responses to emerging challenges.

It is also worth noting that Canada brings Arctic security issues to other international platforms to foster dialogue and encourage broader cooperation. Notably, it participates in the Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and the Northern Dimension [source 16].

Moreover, Ottawa is making efforts to strengthen its own military presence in the Arctic. On April 8, 2024, the Canadian government published a strategic document entitled *Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defense*

[source 2], which outlines defense funding of \$8.1 billion over five years and \$73 billion over twenty years. This includes investments in new Arctic patrol ships, River-class destroyers, unmanned aerial vehicles, multi-role aircraft, and fighter jets. The government also plans to purchase submarines and new icebreakers [source 3]. The updated defense policy places unprecedented emphasis on issues of sovereignty and security in the Arctic, identifying the region as a top priority for defense strengthening. Canadian military exercises are conducted annually in the Arctic under the general name "Operation NANOOK." These exercises cover a range of scenarios, from emergency response (search and rescue, mitigation of man-made disasters) to military operations aimed at defending sovereignty and territorial integrity [source 17]. Participants include not only various branches of the armed forces but also government agencies and local communities.

The Canadian Armed Forces are increasing patrols and surveillance of Arctic territories using aircraft, naval vessels, and satellite systems. These regular patrols aim to control maritime and airspace, detect and prevent illegal activities, and collect intelligence on the military operations of other states in the region. Specifically, Canada plans to expand its fleet to six Arctic and offshore patrol vessels. These ships – designated as Harry DeWolf-class vessels – are being procured under the broader National Shipbuilding Strategy, with final operational readiness expected in 2026 [source 18].

The federal government is also developing military infrastructure in the Arctic, focusing on establishing supply and logistics points and improving conditions for the deployment and support of armed forces in the region. Measures have been taken to modernize the airfield network, build ports and naval bases, and create training centers for military personnel operating in Arctic conditions. On March 18, 2025, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, during his first domestic visit to Iqaluit – the capital of the northern Canadian territory of Nunavut – announced significant investments in Arctic defense infrastructure. These include the development of Nunavut, the creation of an early warning system, and the strengthening of military presence in the region [source 19].

That same month, the government announced plans to establish logistics bases – Northern Operational Support Hubs – in the Canadian cities of Iqaluit, Inuvik, and Yellowknife [source 20]. The creation of these hubs, which will include airstrips, logistics facilities, and essential equipment, is expected to cost \$2.67 billion over 20 years. These facilities will enable the Canadian Armed Forces to maintain a year-round presence in the Arctic and northern regions of the country.

The goal of these projects is to fulfill Canada's strategic objective of enhancing its military presence in the Arctic. The future infrastructure is critical for operational cooperation, rapid deployment, and addressing challenges in remote northern territories more quickly and for extended periods. As of January 2023, the Canadian Armed Forces had logistical support bases for overseas missions in Germany, Kuwait, Jamaica, and Senegal [source 21]. The new Arctic hubs will not only serve military strategic purposes but also benefit northern communities by providing new airstrips, improved access to medical flights, and roads for host communities.

Meanwhile, despite these efforts, Canada's military presence in the Arctic remains significantly smaller than that of the United States and Russia. Vast territories, harsh climatic conditions, and limited financial resources hinder Canada's ability to expand its presence rapidly. Moreover, Ottawa seeks to maintain a balance between strengthening its defense capabilities and keeping tensions in the region low. It continues to engage in regular dialogue with Scandinavian countries and cooperates with key North Atlantic (UK and EU) and North Pacific (Japan, South Korea) states, as well as with Australia. For instance, in March 2025, Canada announced its collaboration with Australia on the development of the Arctic Over-the-Horizon Radar system. This project, part of the NORAD modernization plan, involves a federal investment of more than \$6 billion [source 22]. Its goal is to create a radar system capable of detecting targets at very long ranges – hundreds to thousands of kilometers – beyond the line of sight, which conventional radars cannot reach. This system will significantly enhance Canada's capacity to detect and respond to air and maritime threats in the Arctic.

RETHINKING THE ISSUE OF MILITARIZATION IN THE ARCTIC

In Canada's Arctic policy, the country's stance on militarization is described as "a recalibrated diplomatic approach to advancing Canada's national interests in the region, based on the principles of pragmatic diplomacy" [source 3]. This approach is characterized by an effort to strike a balance between two seemingly contradictory goals: preserving the Arctic as a space for international cooperation, while ensuring national security in a shifting geopolitical environment marked by the growing military activity of other states. This duality defines the core of the Canadian strategy. The strengthening of military capabilities serves to protect national interests in the face of potential threats, while investments in socio-economic development and support for Indigenous peoples contribute to preserving the Arctic as a stable and peaceful region.

Historically, Canada has consistently advocated for the demilitarization of the Arctic [source 19], viewing the region as one where non-military interaction should prevail and where military activity should be limited to functions such as ensuring the safety of navigation, supporting scientific research, responding to emergencies, and maintaining sovereignty. This position was rooted in concern for the region's environmental vulnerability, a focus on socio-economic development, the use of diplomatic and legal mechanisms to resolve disputes, and respect for Indigenous communities.

However, the evolving geopolitical reality has compelled Canadian policymakers to move from a stance of demilitarization to one of **responsible militarization**. The necessity for an increased military presence is now acknowledged across the political spectrum – not only by the Liberal Party but also by the Conservative [source 23] and New Democratic [source 24] parties.

The key elements of the revised approach include:

1. Moderate strengthening and maintenance of the military presence to control Canadian territory, monitor regional developments, and demonstrate readiness to defend national interests-with-

out engaging in excessive militarization that could provoke other actors.

2. Emphasis on civil-military cooperation, wherein the armed forces not only fulfill defense functions but also assist in civilian safety, search and rescue operations, scientific research, and infrastructure development in the Arctic. This reduces the perception of military activity as a threat. A prominent example is *Operation NANOOK*, which incorporates various military-civilian interaction scenarios.

3. Focusing on qualitative rather than quantitative development of military capabilities. This includes modernizing weapons and equipment, improving personnel training, and enhancing rapid deployment and operational effectiveness in Arctic conditions. This approach allows for optimized resource use and maximized returns on defense spending in the region.

However, if tensions continue to rise and relations with Russia and China deteriorate further, maintaining the concept of responsible militarization will become increasingly difficult. There is a growing risk that Canada may be compelled to adopt a more active militarization posture. Additionally, political pressure from NATO allies – particularly the United States – may push Ottawa toward greater military involvement in the Arctic.

Public concern in Canada about Arctic security and sovereignty is also growing. A sociological survey conducted in mid-2024 revealed strong citizen concern over the risk of losing control of Arctic territories without additional measures to protect national interests. Seventy-two percent of respondents believed that Canada should intensify its efforts. Support for infrastructure development and the strengthening of military capabilities in the Arctic was expressed by 58%, while 56% favored deeper Canadian involvement in international discussions on Arctic issues [source 25].

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Canada's Arctic security and defense policy reveals a comprehensive, multi-layered approach that reflects both the preservation of traditional political principles and the adoption of new strategies shaped by evolving geopolitical conditions. Canada's stance on militarization in

the Arctic is based on a dynamic and adaptive set of principles and practical measures, designed to strike a careful balance between safeguarding national security and preserving the Arctic as a region of peace and cooperation. The success of this balancing act will largely depend on future regional developments and on Canada's ability to respond effectively to emerging challenges while staying committed to its core values and principles.

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