

NATO Arctic Security and Canadian Sovereignty in the Far North

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In many ways, the Arctic has become a geopolitical game with mixed messages being sent from all sides. There appears to be a real contradiction in what is being said and what is actually being done to safeguard sovereignty. While Arctic countries have emphasized the importance of resolving conflicting boundary claims through enhanced cooperation, at times, rhetoric has served to fuel rivalries in the resource-rich area. NATO has declared the Arctic a strategically important region with northern member nations individually or collaboratively conducting military and naval operations to showcase their capabilities.

Some have called the release of [Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy](#) statement in August, a significant shift from the Conservative government's often hostile approach in addressing sovereignty issues in the far north. The policy paper declared that, "Canada's vision for the Arctic is of a stable, rules-based region with clearly defined boundaries." It plans to pursue its interests through leadership, stewardship, diplomacy and respect for international law. Canada also seeks a more strategic engagement with the U.S. in the Arctic. Over the summer, they conducted their third [joint continental shelf survey](#). The U.S. and Canada are gradually moving towards merging their Arctic policies and further adopting a more North American strategy. While Canada is placing more emphasis on cooperation and appears ready to resolve boundary disputes, absent is any concrete suggestion on how to engage Russia. Both have claimed the Lomonosov Ridge under the Arctic as an extension of their respective continental shelves. Any aggressive moves to enforce sovereignty in the area could jeopardize future bilateral relations and lead to a possible confrontation.



During Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Arctic tour several months back, he announced support for Canada's next generation of satellites known as [RADARSAT Constellation Mission](#). The system consists of three advanced remote sensing satellites which will increase the ability to monitor activities in the region. Harper stated, "The RADARSAT project has consistently allowed us to defend our Arctic sovereignty, protect the Arctic ecosystem, and develop our resources." He went on to say, "This new phase of RADARSAT will ensure we stay at the forefront of these priorities." Enhancing surveillance capabilities is an important part of safeguarding Canada's security and economic interests in the region. In addition, Harper also announced a new [High Arctic Research Station](#). The year round facility will house scientists and is intended to further, "strengthen Canada's Arctic sovereignty, promote economic and social development." The prime minister has been accused of using his annual northern treks as photo opportunities and criticized for failing to deliver on some past Arctic promises. While on his trip, Harper also focused on security issues and observed military maneuvers.

This year's [Operation Nanook](#), an annual Canadian Forces (CF) sovereignty exercise took place from August 6 to 26 in Canada's eastern and high Arctic area. It was important as for the first time, the Canadian-led exercise included military participation from fellow NATO members, the U.S. and Denmark. Canadian Navy, Army and Air Force personnel, collaborated with naval and air assets from the U.S. Second Fleet, along with the Royal Danish Navy, performing various security drills. The joint war games were intended to, "strengthen preparedness, increase interoperability and exercise a collective response to emerging challenges in the Arctic." In March of this year, NATO troops also participated in [Exercise Cold Response](#) which was held in Norway. It included some 9,000 soldiers from 14 countries and focused, "on cold weather maritime/amphibious operations, interoperability of expeditionary forces, and special and conventional ground operations." As Canada and other nations promote diplomacy, development and science as a means to assert sovereignty in the Arctic, at the same time they continue to expand military operations in the region.

In his article [Welcome to a new era of Arctic security](#), Rob Huebert associate director of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, remarked on the significance of American and Danish participation in Canada's Operation Nanook. He stated it is, "interesting to see these three Arctic friends coming together to improve their naval combat capability in the Far North, a demonstration of force and solidarity to show the world they're serious about protecting this region." Huebert also brings Norway, another NATO member into the scenario and noted, "there seems to be a contradiction between what the four countries are doing and what they're saying. As they take expensive and challenging steps to improve their combat capability in the Arctic, they continue to assert that the region is both stable and peaceful." He goes on to say, "They may be telling their citizens that all is well in the Arctic, but their actions suggest this is not what they truly believe." Huebert also added, "It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Moscow is the target of these vigorous military exercises in the Arctic." Further control of the area is part of a broader global military agenda and there are fears of a potential showdown.

The Conservative government has used the threat of Russian air patrols in the Arctic to justify increased defense spending. In August, two CF-18 Hornet fighter jets were scrambled to shadow a pair of Russian TU-95 Bear bombers. The incident occurred on the eve of Prime Minister Harper's yearly Arctic tour. There appears to have been no real danger and the closest the Russian planes got was within 30 nautical miles of Canadian airspace before

turning back. NORAD described the flights as [routine](#) and said there was no cause for alarm. Nevertheless, the Harper government used the so-called bomber incursion to ramp up Arctic rhetoric and paint themselves as the defenders of Canada's north. Hying up the event was purely for political reasons and further allowed them to make a case for its plans to buy 65 F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets at a price tag of \$16 billion. Some have warned that the acquisition could trigger an [Arctic arms race](#). The decision to purchase the new stealth F-35's is closely tied to deeper U.S.-Canada military integration and a North American security perimeter. It reaffirms Canada's commitment to NORAD as well as NATO.

During a [news conference](#) in September, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was asked by a journalist regarding his position on NATO presence in the Arctic. He seemed uneasy by its growing role and acknowledged, "the Russian Federation watches such activity intently and with some concern. Why? Because after all it is an area of peaceful cooperation, economic cooperation, and the presence of a military factor at the very least raises additional issues." Russian Foreign Minister [Sergei Lavrov](#) has also questioned the need for NATO in the region. He argued, "We do not see what benefit NATO can bring to the Arctic...I do not think NATO would be acting properly if it took upon itself the right to decide who should solve problems in the Arctic." At times, Russia has been denounced for aggressively asserting its sovereignty in the far north which some believe has prompted NATO's increased cooperation in the area. In an effort to counter NATO expansion in the Arctic, Russia is further stepping up its military exercises and continues to improve its combat capabilities in the region.

At the recent [Lisbon Summit](#), NATO unveiled, "a new Strategic Concept that will serve as the Alliance's roadmap for the next ten years, reconfirming the commitment to defend one another against attack as the cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security." Part of the new plan includes NATO and Russia working towards a [strategic partnership](#), "with the aim of contributing to the creation of a common space of peace, security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area." A joint statement also proclaimed that, "The NATO nations and Russia have, today, agreed, in writing, that while we face many security challenges, we pose no threat to each other." What does this all mean for the Arctic region? Just last month, senior NATO commander Admiral James G Stavridis [warned](#) that climate change and a race for resources could lead to conflict in the high north.

Arctic nations continue to assert their sovereignty through military means. Rising tensions could further escalate the militarization of the region. While the process to resolve territorial disputes and the competition to secure resources has thus far been peaceful, there is still the threat of a future armed confrontation in the Arctic.

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