

Why a Defence Review is Necessary and Why it will be Easy to Get it Wrong in the Arctic

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There are growing expectations regarding the Defence Review promised by the new Liberal government. Given the security complexities faced by Canada in the international system and the intent of the government to do things differently from the preceding government, many are looking to the promised review with anticipation. There is little question that a properly conducted Defence Review is necessary for rethinking and reframing Canadian defence policy. However there is always a risk that when improperly done, such reviews may create more damage than good.

This is particularly true regarding the role of the navy in the Arctic. There are significant challenges facing Canada as its third ocean continues to open up. This is requiring Canada's navy to become a three-ocean navy for the first time in its existence. So how is this to be done? What is the main purpose that the Canadian navy will have in the Arctic and how will the navy accomplish it?

Before considering the core issues that are facing Canada, it is necessary to consider what reviews are and why they are undertaken. Based on Canada's experiences with Defence Reviews, there are normally four different but interconnected objectives: (1) to assess the international security environment in which Canada must operate; (2) to provide guidance on future procurement decisions; (3) to achieve political purposes; and (4) to orientate the bureaucracy to the directions and objectives the government wishes to pursue regarding defence issues.¹

The core objective of any Defence Review and perhaps one of the most difficult to get right, is to determine the security environment facing Canada and to identify the major threats to Canadian national security. Once this has been accomplished, the next task is to determine the options that Canada has to provide for the defence of the country. Traditionally the depth to which this is developed in reviews varies from government to government. The third task of reviews tends to be more implicit and away from official justifications for the review, but still remains an important element. Canadian defence reviews have been taken at the beginning of the mandate of a new government.² New governments see a Defence Review – and often a Foreign Policy Review as well – as the means to establish themselves as different from the



Artist's conception of the proposed polar icebreaker, CCG John G. Diefenbaker during icebreaking operations.

preceding government. The fourth reason (which flows from the third) for conducting a Defence Review is to get the bureaucracy and Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) aligned with the new government.

The actual process will always be very demanding on both the civilian and military members of CAF. Reviews will require the senior members of the Department of National Defence (DND) to dedicate significant attention to what the new government wants to do and will also require them to acclimatize to their new political leaders. It is equally important that this process allows the bureaucracy to educate the members of the new government as to what is possible and what is not.

So what does this mean for the navy and the Arctic and the coming Defence Review? First and most important is the manner in which the review frames and understands the rapidly transforming Arctic security environment. Any consideration of the future security threats in the Arctic faces a number of challenges that, if misunderstood, can seriously misdirect Canadian northern naval requirements. The region is being transformed by a wide variety of factors. These include – but are not limited to – climate change, changing economic activities, the ongoing political development/devolution of the Canadian north, and the transforming geopolitical realities of the world.

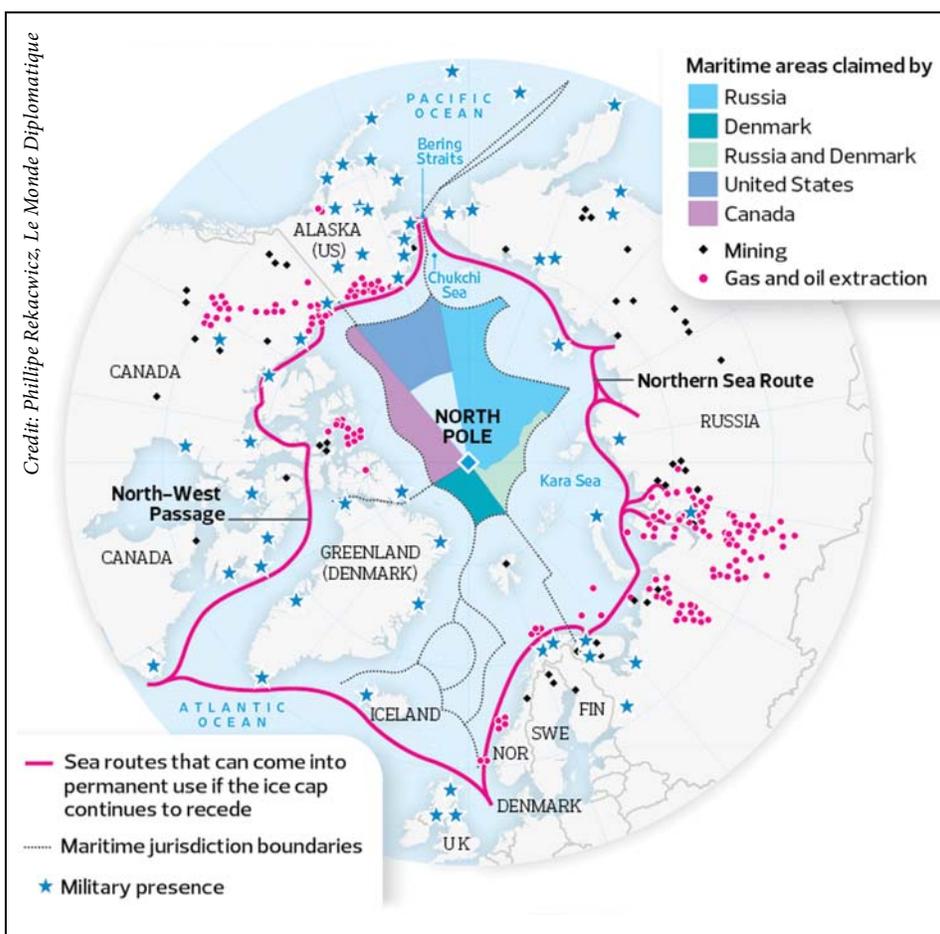
The Arctic is warming more rapidly than the rest of the world.³ But the specific elements of that change and the speed of the change are not yet fully understood. It is expected that the permanent ice-cover will soon be gone, but the exact date is not known. In the face of this uncertainty the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) needs to prepare for an increasingly open Arctic Ocean. The question is how? This warming process will not occur in a linear fashion and, thus, there will be a significant period of time when ice conditions will continue to be very difficult. Even once all of the permanent ice is gone, much of the Arctic Ocean will still re-freeze in the winter months. Furthermore, there will be other environmental factors that will be altered by the changing climate such as increased precipitation, increased storms and in the longer term rising sea-levels caused by the melting Greenland ice-cap that will have serious impacts on the navy's operations in the region.⁴ The rising sea-levels will be a factor not only in the Arctic, but will affect the navy's operations worldwide.

In short, the navy will need to be concerned about increasing operations in a vast area that will remain a very environmentally challenging region. The navy will need to have new capabilities to operate in waters that will be opening, but will also retain various degrees of ice. These waters are not well charted and will remain dangerous for operations until they are properly charted. And regardless of the degree of open water, the region is geographically huge with a minimum of infrastructure support.

The second factor that is very dynamic and will remain critically important for future naval operations will be the magnitude of economic activity in the region. As climate change melts the ice-cover and as new technologies are developed to operate in the north, there will be increasing economic activity in the region. However, non-Arctic factors such as the global markets will play a deciding role in the pace of the development of any resources. The search for oil in the north clearly illustrates this reality.⁵ As the ice melted and new means of searching for oil in Arctic waters developed, combined with high world-wide prices, there was a period in the 2000s when many believed that the Arctic region would be the location of a new "bonanza" of oil production.⁶ The crash of world oil prices in 2014 has crushed many of these expectations in the short term.

Nevertheless, there is still an increase in some economic activity such as tourism and specifically cruise ships operating in the Canadian north. In the longer term, it is probable that world oil world prices will rebound and that there will be an increase in economic activity in the region including oil and gas, but also other resources such as iron ore from Baffin Island. As these activities increase, the navy will be asked to act in a supporting role to provide security.

While it is unlikely to be called upon to be the lead agency, the navy will increasingly be tasked to provide assistance in the event of any accidents or incidents that occur because of the increased economic activities. As commercial activity develops in the region there is an increased possibility of incidents such as an oil spill or ship grounding or worse. In these instances the navy will be required to respond in cooperation with other agencies such as the Coast Guard and the RCMP. It will need to dedicate significant resources to respond to constabulary roles that are not the normal role of the navy but that will be important in the region. To do this the navy must have a robust ability to operate over vast distances in difficult conditions and be prepared to operate quickly with other



Sea routes, jurisdictional claims and resources in the Arctic.

Credit: Philippe Rekaewicz, Le Monde Diplomatique

branches of government at all levels and with the local communities.

The third factor that is often overlooked but will play an increasingly important role for future naval operations in the region is the evolving political environment regarding governance in the region. As the federal government continues the process of devolving responsibilities to the three territories, they will take on more responsibilities for the region. At the same time the implementation of the various land claim agreements will also continue. These factors will need to be considered in future naval operations to ensure that all operations conducted in the region do so with a full understanding of the domestic situation.

Ultimately the most important question that the Defence Review must consider is: what is the security environment of the Arctic region? This will be very difficult to answer due to three reasons, but it is essential that the review get this as correct as possible. First the core factors shaping the Arctic security environment are in continual flux. The security environment in 2016 is not the same security environment that existed in 2006.

Second, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the elements that have allowed the Arctic security environment to remain distinct from the global security

environment are rapidly disintegrating. The melting ice by itself means that the Arctic Ocean is becoming an ocean that is connected to all other oceans – and this is only one of the factors! Thus the challenges of the non-polar world are increasingly becoming the problems of the Arctic.

Third, there remains a divide in Canada about whether the Arctic will be a region of cooperation or conflict.⁷ There are many influential researchers and government officials who are committed to the assumption that the region is a zone of peace and will remain so into the future. There is a smaller number of researchers and officials who see the Arctic region as more complicated and that there are critical and dangerous security issues that are now developing. This divide becomes important in determining the assumptions and starting point of the Defence Review, so it is important that the review recognizes these complexities. There will be a different endpoint for a review that begins with the assumption that the region is one of peace and cooperation and one that begins with the assumption that there are growing security challenges that the navy will need to address.

What then are the key issues that can be agreed upon that are now shaping the security environment? The first is the geopolitical nature of the region. The geographic reality is



HMCS Moncton, a Kingston-class Maritime Coastal Defence Vessel sits anchored alongside the CCG ship Pierre Radisson for fuelling in Nunavut during Operation Qimmiq on 14 September 2015.

Credit: Corporal Felicia Ogunniya, 12 Wing Imaging Services, Shearwater, N.S.



One of the new *Dolgorukiy*-class of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, *Alexander Nevsky* (K 550) – commissioned in December 2013 – in Vilyuchinsk, Russia, 30 September 2015.

that Russia and the United States are Canada's two closest Arctic neighbours and that will continue to be the security reality facing Canada. The security actions of these two states will ultimately be the most important consideration in attempting to determine the future course of action of the navy. An examination of the actions of these two states demonstrates that the maritime security dimension of the region is growing increasingly complicated. Both states officially affirm their desire to keep the region an area of peace and international cooperation.⁸ This is found in both Russian and American policy documents. But since the mid-2000s both countries have begun to build up their military forces in the region for non-Arctic purposes – the Russians more than the Americans. These forces are substantial and are altering the security dynamics of the region.

Since the mid-2000s, the Russians have been redeveloping their submarine-based nuclear deterrence. To date most of their efforts have focused on rebuilding their northern fleet. Russia has also begun a process of building and rebuilding northern military bases along the Northern Sea Route.⁹ Most of these efforts are focused on modernizing and strengthening the Russian nuclear deterrent and providing security to an increasingly ice-free northern coastline. But this increased regional military capability is also being used against Russia's Arctic neighbours. Thus, when the Ukrainian crisis erupted, Russian air and sea assets in the region were used to signal Russian displeasure with the Western response to its actions in Ukraine.

At the same time, the Americans continue to see the defence of their homeland as one of their most important security requirements and this includes their northern border. There are two major ramifications for the RCN. First, the Americans are strengthening their anti-ballistic missile capabilities in Alaska.¹⁰ This is not currently to defend against a northern-based missile threat, but instead is focused on defending against a North Korean threat. But as relations with China continue to become more challenging, it is possible that this capability will form the basis for defending against a Chinese long-range missile threat. If that happens, it is possible that the Americans will look to augmenting their existing capability with maritime assets.

Second, regardless of the American legal preoccupation with the Northwest Passage, the overall security concern is to ensure that the northern border of the United States remains as secure as the southern border against external threats. As the ice melts and increased activity occurs, Americans will increasingly become concerned about the region. In addition, it is no longer possible to rule out an increasing presence of the Chinese navy in the north. While such considerations were previously considered unrealistic, this is no longer the case. It is becoming clear that the Chinese are determined to become at least a regional hegemon. To this end, China has increasingly looked to strengthen its navy. In 2015, its navy appeared in northern waters in both the Pacific and Atlantic.¹¹ While it is impossible to predict with any certainty what Chinese



Credit: RCN

Artist's impression of the *Harry Dewolf*-Class Arctic Offshore Patrol Ship. Canada's answer to constabulary roles in the Arctic.

naval policy will be in the Arctic, it is necessary to begin thinking of the ramifications for Canada.

Thus the core strategic challenge facing the RCN is to understand what it will need to do in the Arctic. As the ice melts and economic activity unfolds, the navy will need to prepare for new activities that will put new pressures to perform additional security activities in the region. At the same time, the navy will need to consider how to prepare to respond to the changing strategic dynamic in the Arctic. The region is about to become much more important to both the United States and Russia. Where Canada fits in this regard will ultimately become the most important consideration for the navy in the region. This will emerge as the most important question that the Defence Review needs to address on this matter. It will need to ask how the RCN will respond to three differing requirements.

First, how can the RCN best respond to the constabulary requirements of a more accessible Arctic? What does it need to ensure that it can provide the same security that it does on the East and West Coasts of Canada? The Defence Review also needs to consider how to incorporate the other agencies with which the RCN must work. In particular this requires that any Defence Review includes discussion of the Coast Guard and the RCMP. This has not been done before, but it must be done in this review.

Second, how can the navy best act as an agent of stabilization in a region where US and Russian core strategic interests are expected to grow? What are the means by which Canada can ensure that misunderstandings do not drive an uncontrollable dynamic that leads the Arctic to become a region of competition and conflict?

Finally, how can the navy best be prepared to respond if relations with Russia deteriorate? If the Defence Review

finds that the increased tensions are being caused by a Russia that is acting more aggressively in the Arctic and the world, then it must determine what Canada must do to ensure that its Arctic security is protected. This will require a consideration of the equipment and policies that Canada can pursue on its own, but also the actions it needs to take in cooperation with its allies in the region. This will include (but not be limited to) the United States and in particular cooperation through NORAD, and also cooperation with European allies through NATO.

This will not be easy. There are a wide number of unknowns that could lead Canada into very different security environments in the Arctic. Nevertheless, given the importance of the region, it is imperative that the government give this careful consideration in order to get its Arctic security policy as correct as possible. 🍷

Notes

1. Canadian Defence Reviews follow a range of formats. Since 1964 there have been six such exercises that have produced either a Defence White Paper or something similar. (1) government of Lester B. Pearson (Liberal), *White Paper on Defence* (1964); (2) government of Pierre Trudeau (Liberal), *Defence in the 70s: White Paper on Defence* (1971); (3) government of Brian Mulroney (Conservative), *Challenge and Commitment: A Defence Policy for Canada* (1987); (4) Government of Jean Chretien (Liberal), *1994 Defence White Paper* (1994); (5) Government of Paul Martin (Liberal), *Canada's International Policy Statement: A Role of Pride and Influence in the World - Defence* (2005); and (6) government of Stephen Harper (Conservative), "Canada First Defence Strategy" (2008).
2. An exception is the 1947 Defence Review that was conducted by Prime Minister William Lyon MacKenzie King. This was done at the end of his term in office.
3. Susan Joy Hassol, *Impacts of a Warming Arctic: Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
4. Eric Rignot, Isabella Velicogna, Michiel van den Broeke, Andrew Monaghan, and Jan T.M. Lenaerts, "Acceleration of the Contribution of the Greenland and Antarctic Ice Sheets to Sea Level Rise," *Geophysics Research Letters*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (March 2011).
5. US Geological Survey, *Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle*, July 2008.
6. See for example Roger Howard, *The Arctic Gold Rush: The New Race for Tomorrow's Natural Resources* (London: Continuum, 2009); and Richard Sale and Eugene Potapov, *The Scramble for the Arctic: Ownership, Exploitation and Conflict in the Far North* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2010).
7. For a good consideration of some of the key difference see Franklyn Griffiths, Rob Huebert and Whitney Lackenbauer, *Canada and the Changing Arctic: Sovereignty, Security and Stewardship* (London ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011).
8. For the assessment of Russia see Alexander Sergunov and Valery Konyshv, *Russia in the Arctic: Hard or Soft Power* (New York: Ibidem Press, Columbia University, 2015); for the United States see Whitney Lackenbauer and Rob Huebert, "Premier Partners: Canada, the United States and Arctic Security," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, Vol. 21 (2015), pp. 1-16.
9. Katarzyna Zysk, "Russia Turns North, Again: Interests, Policies and the Search for Coherence," in Leif Christian Jensen and Geir Honneland (eds), *Handbook of the Politics of the Arctic* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015).
10. Robert Burns, "US to Beef up Missile Defence against North Korea," *Alaska Journal of Commerce*, 21 May 2013.
11. Missy Ryan and Dan Lamothe, "Chinese Naval Ships came within 12 Nautical Miles of American Soil," *Washington Post*, 4 September 2015; and Shannon Tiezzi, "China's Navy Makes First-Ever Tour of Europe's Arctic States," *The Diplomat*, 2 October 2015.

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