Three interconnected forces – the increasing effects of climate change, heightened interest in resource development and increasing concern for demarking and patrolling maritime boundaries – are altering the geopolitical make-up of the Arctic, ushering in a distinct era in regional relations. The underlying principles of this new regime, however, are uncertain. Will a focus on sovereignty and traditional security concerns create a competitive system guided by a balance of power logic? Or will the Arctic states work cooperatively to deal with the transnational issues affecting this rapidly changing region? While there are examples of both cooperation and competition, this is the formative stage when the policies, behaviours and interactions of those involved will cement the norms and values governing their future relations.

Over the last few years Canada has attempted to clarify its intentions via public declarations, policies and most recently the Northern Strategy released in 2009. Although the strategy demonstrates a wider policy orientation than before, evident by its focus on sustainable development and environmental impacts, the protection of sovereignty via military security remains the top priority. It is important to have the forces necessary to exercise control over territory and promote Canada’s maritime claims, but Ottawa must understand it is both a product and agent of this evolving international regime. It is in Canadian interests to promote and operate in a rule-based multilateral regime bounded by recognition that security concerns are complex and interdependent, demanding regional coordination.

By making regional cooperation a defining feature of its Arctic strategy, Canada can be a leader in promoting multilateralism in the interest of all. This will not be easy, in particular because Moscow and Washington have both shown themselves loathe to be bound by such frameworks. The transnational nature of the issues facing the Arctic, however, makes multilateral processes vital if they are to be addressed. To achieve this, a broadening of the concept of security that moves away from strictly military concerns over sovereignty and encompasses other non-traditional issues must be constructed and accepted by Arctic states. Recent developments within Canadian Arctic policy point to such a transition but Ottawa must continue to promote the construction of an effective regional regime to tackle the real and pressing contemporary issues.

A Short History of the Arctic

It is important to understand the concept of a regime, specifically in relation to security (see Figure 1). An international regime is defined as a series of norms, values and rules which become the paradigm guiding the nature of interactions among actors in an area. A key facet of any international regime is the issue of security, specifically how actors view one another in terms of their survival. States must decide whether their neighbours are (1) important in their definition and achievement of their own security and (2) whether they enhance or inhibit security. The traditional understanding of security is based upon comparisons of military power among states and is focused on issues such as territorial defence and spheres of influence. More recent and constructive views of security, however, say that it should be viewed as a process of competing ideas about what is being protected (the referent), how (the means employed) and from what (the existential threat). The changing emphasis and referents throughout the history of the Arctic have dictated
the perceptions and actions of states in the region, and thus behaviour will vary from competition to cooperation depending on the nature of the issue and the importance attached to it.

The Arctic has historically been seen as a remote place sparsely populated with small bands of natives who have become habituated to the harsh climate. The only people interested in the area in the pre-WWII era were explorers, many of whom wanted to find a maritime passage between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. The Arctic's climate and geography made it a mostly undisturbed area and the major powers were unwilling to invest significant capital and energy into it. There existed, therefore, no Arctic regime due to the disinterest in the region.

With the beginning of the Cold War, however, advancement in the projection of military power via the bomber, and later intercontinental ballistic missiles, made the Arctic of interest to the Soviets and Americans as it provided the shortest route for an attack on each other. The Arctic became a key strategic region for both the United States and the Soviet Union. As the country in between, this made it an important interest for Canada as well. The regime during the Cold War was a balance of power focusing on traditional security concerns within the wider global relationship between Washington and Moscow.

A new regime began to emerge with the end of the Cold War. Measures were undertaken – most notably by Norway, Finland and Canada – to establish an Arctic regime based on a multilateral framework. There were increased levels of cooperation amongst states, dealing with ‘low politics,’ such as sustainable development and scientific research. The first concrete result was the signing in 1991 of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy by the eight Arctic states (Canada, United States, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia), which established a number of committees to monitor climate change, specifically ice reduction and changes to flora and fauna. The agreement started a period of growing regional cooperation and dialogue culminating with the Canadian-led initiative to create the Arctic Council in 1996. This provided a permanent multilateral forum for interstate cooperation in the areas of climate change research, oil and gas research and Arctic shipping. Canadian attempts to include security matters in the mandate were rejected by the Americans and subsequently scrapped to ensure the United States would become a member. But it was the overall disinterest in the region from a geopolitical perspective throughout the 1990s that ensured the development of a cooperative multilateral Arctic international regime focused on low political issues.

By the late 1990s, however, interest in the region had grown as its accessibility increased, creating opportunities for

Figure 1. The Arctic International Regime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International Paradigm:</th>
<th>Power politics; Balance of Power logic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driving Concerns:</td>
<td>Sovereignty; traditional security concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Behaviour:</td>
<td>Increased military allocation of resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cooperation

T0 before 1945

T1 1945-1990

T2 1990s

T3 Late 1990s to mid-2000s (present?)

Source: Author

A Soviet Tu-95 Bear aircraft being escorted by a CF-18 Hornet in 1987.
resource extraction and transport. A 2008 US Geological survey estimated that 90 billion barrels of recoverable oil and 1,670 trillion cubic feet of natural gas lies in the region. This represents approximately 22% of the world’s undiscovered natural resources, attracting great attention from regional actors, specifically the circumpolar states (i.e., those states that directly border the Arctic Ocean) of Canada, United States, Denmark, Norway and Russia. Such heightened interest, though, has mostly been focused on military security in defence of national sovereignty, not only of land but, more importantly, of waters claimed by various actors. This has shifted relations off a cooperative track towards a competitive one with the introduction of ‘high’ political issues into the region.

The growing deterioration of the ice and estimates that 84% of the natural resources are offshore, have motivated states to exercise their perceived sovereignty in the Arctic Ocean. There may be debate about the rate and specific implications of climate change, but there is a consensus that accessibility to the Arctic is increasing at rates higher than predicted. As a result states are investing huge sums of capital to finance scientific research to determine exactly where their extended Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) lies. The extended EEZ is an area where a state does not have absolute authority but does have the right to develop the resources, as outlined in Part V of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In order to make a claim for the extension of the EEZ (beyond their granted 200 nm zone), parties to UNCLOS must collect data to argue that their territory is an extension of an underwater continental shelf. The UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, established through UNCLOS, is a group of leading scientists in the field who will determine if a state’s claims are valid. Upon ratification of UNCLOS, each state has 10 years to provide findings to the committee. All the circumpolar states except the United States are signatories and are cognisant of the deadlines for submitting their proposals. Russia submitted its claim in 2001 but it is being revised after feedback from the UN committee. Norway accepted the committee’s finding of its claim in 2009, Canada has until 2013 and Denmark has until 2014 to submit. There are, however, overlapping claims, specifically: Denmark, Canada and Russia around the North Pole; Russia and Norway in the vicinity of Spitsbergen Island; and Canada and the United States in the Beaufort Sea.

Although there are multilateral agreements and institutions, since the mid-2000s traditional security concerns have been a growing force driving state policies. The region has quickly become a new strategic domain, and the geography has been re-infused with importance due to national interests relating to control of and access to resources and transport routes. Russia, having recovered from the turbulence of the early post-Soviet years, is now re-emerging in the region. It is investing heavily in scientific research and military equipment to secure its northern claims. Although perhaps the least involved in the Arctic directly, since 9/11 the United States has grown
to handle their boundary disputes peacefully, proclaiming UNCLOS as the main legal framework governing the region. Will this temper the increase of competitive behaviour? All the circumpolar states have continued to augment their military capabilities in the area. While the chance of conflict amongst the circumpolar states is unlikely, the introduction of military forces can cause uncertainty, mistrust and/or miscalculation, affect the willingness of states to work together, and lead – without any state consciously planning this – to an emphasis on balance of power logic.

There are thus signs of increased military presence in the Arctic but there are signs that cooperation is becoming an embedded aspect of this emerging regime as well. Let me give five examples. First, the declaration of Ilulissat is the first time the circumpolar states have agreed publicly to resolve maritime boundaries through diplomatic-legal avenues. Second, numerous scientific projects including studying the Lomonosov Ridge by Canada and Denmark show that cooperation on work of mutual interest is possible. Third, Canada and Russia have agreed to work on projects pertaining to their indigenous populations. Fourth, in May 2011 the Arctic Council states signed a search and rescue treaty, delineating the area of responsibility of each state – the first comprehensive treaty signed by the council’s members. Finally, Canada’s annual Arctic military exercise, Operation Nanook, has increasingly involved other militaries in scenarios relating to non-traditional security matters, and the creation of a training centre in Resolute Bay demonstrates a growing focus on coordinating resources to respond to issues.

It is perplexing to see such a mix of cooperative and competitive behaviour. The circumpolar states declare themselves willing to work multilaterally on a number of issues from climate change effects to studying the sea bed and Arctic shipping regulations. At the same time these states use unilateral action – often via pumped-up military forces – to protect what they see as their national interests. It seems that the reactions are related to whether the issues are seen as low politics or high politics.

Concerns over physical control of territory, maritime zones and resources are considered ‘high’ politics and are easily overtaken by a zero-sum mentality whereby the gain of one is at the loss of another. Matters of ‘low’ politics are seen as important but not directly affecting sovereignty (i.e., the authority of the state over its territory and people). In the Arctic, security and sovereignty have been interlinked based on the notion that protecting the integrity of the state is paramount. The focus on security has usually been through a lens of relative comparisons of...
military power. Instead of delineating interests in terms of low and high politics, the states involved must realize the interconnectedness of these matters and their trans-national character. Climate change will affect the entire region, regardless of jurisdiction. Indeed, the effects of a melting Arctic will be felt worldwide. Promoting safe transit and resource development will require multilateral efforts to harmonize policies to protect the fragile region. Greater security force cooperation will be needed to tackle search and rescue operations, natural or human-made disaster response and perhaps counter the introduction of smuggling and terrorism into the region.

The Future of Canada’s Arctic Strategy in a Changing Environment

The 2009 Northern Strategy was the first substantial Canadian policy document delineating an approach to the region that was not just focused on traditional security concerns. Alongside protecting Arctic sovereignty (which is still listed as a main priority), social and economic development, improving northern governance and protecting the environment are listed as priorities. The strategy states that the various maritime disputes “pose no sovereignty or defence challenges to Canada,” but despite this, there are calls for a stronger military presence in the Arctic, specifically improving surveillance, training and new aerial and naval platforms to put “more boots on the Arctic tundra, more ships in the water and a better eye in the sky.” The challenge for Canada, therefore, is how to employ security forces, in concert with other states, to deal with the wide array of issues confronting the region.

Developing positive, rule-based working relations with Russia and the United States will be vital to ensure power politics – in particular a split between the four NATO circumpolar states and Russia – does not lead to an escalation of competition and mistrust in the region. Canada has maritime disputes with both Russia and the United States, and it is imperative that avenues are designed to ensure these disputes do not lead to a deterioration of cooperation. Ottawa should emphasize strengthening the Arctic international regime based on a rule-based institutional approach in which bilateral and multilateral venues are preferred over unilateral actions and outbursts of sovereign pride. Recognizing that many of these matters will not be resolved in the near future, Canada must work to ensure an open dialogue is pursued to strengthen norms of reciprocity and cooperation in order to build a regime capable of handling such issues. This must be done soon as deadlines for EEZ claims are quickly approaching and there remains no clear method for resolving such conflicts.

One of the first matters on which Canada should focus is the potential militarization of the Arctic. Making the Arctic a nuclear-weapon-free zone would be a significant movement in this direction. The inability of the Arctic Council to address such matters is a serious liability and
Arctic states need either to improve existing or create new multilateral instruments to allow militarization to be discussed. Regular meetings of Arctic states within multinational working groups would create a forum to discuss and investigate security issues along with coordinating the resources required to address them. While many states, including Canada, will continue to use military forces to enforce sovereign claims and conduct patrols, resources should be allocated to developing constabulary forces to counteract the most likely threats to the region.

As well, Canada should work towards establishing and strengthening liaison with regional militaries and security forces through exchanges and joint exercises. These initiatives would reduce tensions, build trust, develop infrastructure for information sharing and signal understanding of the collective security challenges Arctic states face. In terms of maritime disputes, perhaps options such as creating a demarcation zone around the North Pole where Canadian, Russian and Danish claims conflict, and making this area international waters should be investigated. Or perhaps Canada could push for an agreement that exploration of resources in contested areas will be gated. Or perhaps Canada could push for an agreement that exploration of resources in contested areas will be gated. Or perhaps Canada could push for an agreement that exploration of resources in contested areas will be gated. Or perhaps Canada could push for an agreement that exploration of resources in contested areas will be gated. Or perhaps Canada could push for an agreement that exploration of resources in contested areas will be gated. Or perhaps Canada could push for an agreement that exploration of resources in contested areas will be gated.

A strong rule-bound regime is necessary to ensure conflict is avoided while maintaining national sovereignty and protecting the sensitive ecosystem. It appears that the Arctic states are not willing to recreate the institutional make-up of the region, but Canada should take the lead, specifically when it assumes the Arctic Council’s chairmanship in 2013, in promoting and developing further multilateral instruments necessary to deal with the changing region. Arrangements in the Arctic must not only deal with regional states, but also try to accommodate other actors who would like to be included, specifically China, Japan and South Korea. These three Asian states are ad hoc observers at the Arctic Council but are seeking permanent observer status, although the Arctic states seem somewhat reluctant to increase their status. China’s growing interest in particular is raising concerns among other Arctic states, most notably Russia, but even so joint resource ventures by Chinese and Russian companies in the Arctic are decreasing traditional security concerns between the two. Joint ventures in resource development and scientific research may be excellent avenues for confidence-building measures between the Arctic states.

Canada must take a more assertive role in the Arctic, specifically pushing for a multilateral framework. Like the other Arctic states, Canada continues to intensify its military activities in the region rather than calling for a strong regime defined by a rule-based multilateral framework.

There needs to be an institutional configuration in place to deal with future uncertainties and provide meaningful levels of security to members thereby ensuring that unilateral military-security action does not become the overriding paradigm. While security forces will be needed to handle traditional and non-traditional challenges, the militarization of the region would be detrimental to resolving existing issues with fellow Arctic states.

In order to ensure this does not happen, new ways of thinking about security that include both ‘low’ and ‘high’ politics must be promoted. Security in the Arctic needs to be understood as a process clearly delineating what needs to be protected, with what methods and against what threat. While sovereignty is a security issue, it is not the only one states should be addressing – climate change and increased activity in the region, including shipping and resource development, raise new challenges that need to be dealt with in a coordinated manner. Military forces, while useful in a variety of aspects, should not be the only resources available to deal with these matters. Critical reflection on the nature of security and the resources necessary to achieve it are vital. In the Arctic security is dependent on collective action and trust to handle the transnational issues that affect not just the region but the world as well.

Notes
3. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 9.

Adam MacDonald received his Masters in political science in 2009 from the University of Victoria and his research interests include Canadian foreign policy, international relations and Chinese foreign and defence policy.