



[The Arctic. Between Conflict and Cooperation](#)

The North American View of the Arctic

How Canada and the United States Are
Responding to Changes in the Far North

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When the legendary American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan set out the founding doctrine of the US Navy at the end of the 19th century with its central principle of maritime dominance, there was no mention of the Arctic. Yet with the rebuilding of Russian maritime capabilities after the Cold War and the simultaneous heightening of Chinese ambitions to challenge American hegemony at every opportunity, there has been a significant shift in the importance of the Arctic for both the United States and Canada. This poses considerable challenges for both of these Arctic littoral states in terms of their security policy.¹

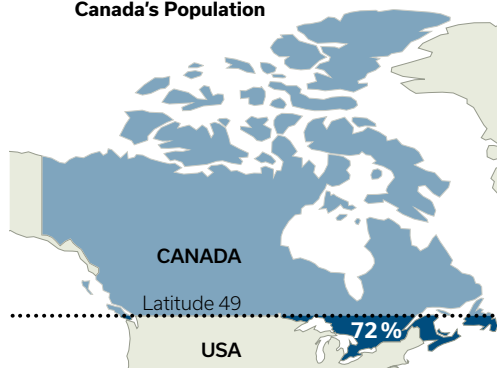
The defence of the North Atlantic begins in the Arctic: this was a point emphasised by the Commander of the US Second Fleet, Vice Admiral Daniel Dwyer, in a podcast by a Canadian think tank in the summer of 2022.² Historically, the operational area of the Second Fleet, based in Norfolk, Virginia, has always included the North Pole and parts of the Arctic.³ The reactivation of this fleet in 2018 (after its deactivation in 2011) reflects more than any other measure the final recognition of new geopolitical realities and an altered threat perception in both the United States and Canada.

Canada as an “Arctic Nation”

From a Canadian perspective, the Arctic has been one of the most critical and important strategic zones since the beginning of the Cold War. The end of that conflict initially contributed to the impression that some of the geopolitical factors that had made the Arctic such a dangerous zone had disappeared – and for a short time this may well have been the case. But when Vladimir Putin came to power and Russia decided to militarise the Arctic, the region regained its key significance within the international system as a zone of strategic interaction. This Canadian assessment has been reinforced by Russia’s more aggressive military demeanour since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and even more so since the start of its war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

Canada is the world’s second largest country by area after Russia and has six time zones. From Toronto, the flight distance to the North Pole is greater than to the equator. Yet Canadians nonetheless regard themselves as an Arctic nation. This self-perception is even reflected in the national anthem⁴, and it is not uncommon for representatives of the country to refer to Canadians as a “Northern people”.⁵ Canada would therefore seem to have a powerful attachment to the Arctic, at least rhetorically. Yet the vast majority of the population – about 95 per cent – live within a 400-kilometre-wide zone along the border with the United States, with 72 per cent inhabiting a very small zone south of the 49th parallel,⁶ which forms part of the US-Canadian border – hence far removed from Arctic regions.

Fig. 1: Geographical Distribution of Canada’s Population



Source: own illustration based on Allison 2021, n. 6.
Map: Natural Earth ©.

This is another reason why, more often than not, Canada's three northern provinces and territories (Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Yukon) are not really of great interest from the perspective of Canadian politics: they occasionally attract political attention but hardly ever provoke political action. This is also true with regard to security policy aspects – despite the strategic importance of the region: even though one government after another has paid lip service to the development of the North, there has often been little to show for it in reality. The United States regularly reminds Canada that if it claims sovereignty in the Arctic, it should take action to demonstrate this. Former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in office from 2006 to 2015, went to the North at least every summer to take part in Operation Nanook, an annual military exercise. His successor, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of the Liberals, has not yet followed suit.

Arctic policy under the incumbent government is focused on domestic issues.

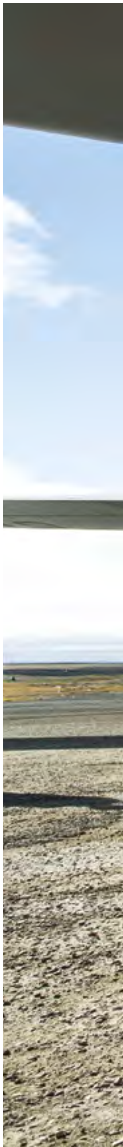
Canada's Arctic Strategy

It is nonetheless the case that Canada has had a formalised Arctic strategy for decades. The main objective of this strategy is to affirm sovereignty through international recognition of Canada's presence and positions in the Arctic. This dates back to the time of Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's government in the period from 1984 to 1993, when a dispute arose with the United States over sovereignty in the Arctic: this went down in history as the Polar Sea controversy of 1985. At the time, the American icebreaker USCGC Polar Sea sailed the Arctic Northwest Passage from Greenland to Alaska without first obtaining official permission from the Canadian government, since the United States considered the Northwest Passage to be an international strait open to shipping – as it still does to this day. By contrast, the Canadian

government took – and takes – the view that the passage is situated within the Canadian border. Nevertheless, Canada was informed about the voyage in advance and decided to cooperate with the United States, and the Canadian government provided observers to remain on board the US vessel throughout the supply voyage. Yet when the plans for the icebreaker's voyage became known, a dispute arose in the Canadian parliament, with critics claiming that the icebreaker's passage violated the country's sovereignty, while the other side denied this, calling the argument "deliberately anti-American".⁷

The efforts of the Canadian Liberals in developing an Arctic policy of their own since they came to power in 2015 have focused on domestic issues. In December 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau committed to working with northern residents and indigenous partners to develop a new Arctic policy framework. 2017 saw round-table discussions being held with residents of the Arctic and the North, young people, key experts and stakeholders including industry, academics and NGOs, with a discussion guideline subsequently being published in November 2017. The political objective of this guideline was to find out from Canadian Arctic residents and from Canadians in general what they wanted with regard to the Arctic, with a focus on the question of what could be done to support a strong, prosperous and sustainable Canadian Arctic. 2018 and 2019 were dedicated to developing and validating the framework with partners, and new funding of more than 700 million Canadian dollars (just under 500 million euros) was subsequently earmarked for the project as part of the 2019 federal budget. Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework was launched in September 2019.⁸

The first and most important issue for the government is the question of reconciliation with the indigenous peoples of the North. Canada tends to be thought of as a young country with a relatively short history and national narrative, but the history of the country's indigenous peoples goes back thousands of years. Since the Confederation in 1867, the beginning of its



colonial self-government, Canada has undergone a complex and gradual process of democratisation. Embedded in Canada's political culture and prosperity, however, is a deep-seated history of exclusion, injustice and indifference. Land that is considered public in Canada is still referred to as "Crown land", ignoring the fact that it was frequently confiscated directly from indigenous peoples and that the latter even have claims to the land under current Canadian legislation

(including a share in the proceeds of natural resource exploitation). Justin Trudeau's government, in particular, emphasises that Canada is still only at the beginning of a challenging and painful process of coming to terms with its colonial past.

The second aspect on which the government's policy focuses is environmental and economic development, with the environment being the



New approach in the Arctic? Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau visited Nunavut in August 2022 together with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. So far, security policy aspects have played a subordinate role in Canada's Arctic policy. [Photo: Jason Franson, AP, picture alliance.](#)

primary concern. The international dimension is not a priority. Canada does say that it would like to see a rules-based system of cooperation in the Arctic wherever possible, and reference is also made to defence policy, but there is a lack of any more detailed explanation of this aspect. Not without good reason, many critics point out that there is little evidence of what this policy aims to achieve in terms of positioning Canada on the international stage.

The start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 dashed the hopes of many Canadians concerning what they call “Arctic exceptionalism” – the idea that the Arctic is a unique area of cooperation. What is often referred to in Canada since February 2022 as the “resumption” of Russia’s war with Ukraine after 2014 has exposed the fact that it is impossible to cooperate with a nation that is willing to use military force in the way that Russia has been doing in Ukraine since the beginning of 2022. For this reason, any initiatives that might be undertaken by Canada to improve the rules-based system in the Arctic region will almost certainly have little chance of success at this point.

Canada has not done enough to develop capabilities of its own in the Northwest Passage.

The Question of Defending Sovereignty in the Arctic

By far the largest shares of the Arctic landmass are held by Canada (about 40 per cent) and Russia (about 50 per cent), although the population of Canada’s three northern provinces and territories in the Arctic is comparatively small at about 130,000.⁹ Territorial integrity is one of the most emotional issues in the Canadian political psyche. This can be traced back beyond the above-mentioned conflict in the 1980s to a crisis that became known as the Alaskan boundary dispute of 1903 between Canada and the United States. The former colonial power of

both parties to the conflict, the United Kingdom, acted as the mediator, but ultimately the dispute was decided in favour of the US.¹⁰ Canada’s defeat in this confrontation dealt a blow to that same political psyche, and this was then compounded in the Second World War when Canada was dependent on the United States for the protection of its northernmost border against Japan and Germany, and later in the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

A relic that survives from those times is Washington’s refusal to accept Canadian claims to sovereignty over the Northwest Passage. While Canada has always insisted that this route lies within its territory, which would give Ottawa the right to unilaterally determine who can enter and on what conditions, Washington has been equally consistent in its position that it is an international strait, which would mean that as long as ships abide by international rules, they should not have to ask Canada for permission to transit.

From Canada’s perspective, the claim to ownership of the Northwest Passage is non-negotiable, giving the Canadian government full control over legislation in this region and what happens there. However, Canada has had to admit that it has not really done much to build the kind of capabilities that Russia, for example, uses to assert its sovereignty over the Northern Sea Route along its territory: there is a lack of suitable monitoring facilities and in particular relevant infrastructure such as ports and military bases; likewise, there are not enough icebreakers to carry out patrols. For this reason, Canadian efforts to control the Northwest Passage are much less effective than Russian measures. The European Union continues to support the US view, and there are increasing signs that some Asian countries may also adopt this position. South Korea has challenged Canadian control in certain forums, for example, including the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The same applies to Singapore.

There can be little doubt that with the melting of the ice and a possible increase in shipping,

the issue of control over the Northwest Passage will return to the political agenda. It will be interesting to see whether Justin Trudeau's government is able to respond adequately to the challenges this involves. Regulation of the Northwest Passage has only been attempted in relation to the United States to date – with mixed results. In the wake of the Polar Sea controversy of 1985, an agreement between the governments of Canada and the US on Arctic cooperation was signed three years later. Both sides agreed that it was “desirable to cooperate in order to advance their shared interests in Arctic development and security”.¹¹ An even more pivotal passage is to be found under point 3 of the agreement, which states that “all navigation by US icebreakers within waters claimed by Canada to be internal will be undertaken with the consent of the Government of Canada.” Under international law, there is a difference between permission and consent, however. This choice of words in an international treaty is still regarded by scholars today as a kind of fig leaf to protect Canadian sensitivities regarding territorial integrity, but also to motivate the United States to provide greater support in terms of security policy through a presence in the Northwest Passage. Cooperation under the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), which was established for the defence sector back in 1958, also points in this direction: this joint US-Canadian facility to monitor space and warn of intercontinental ballistic missile attacks involves tacit Canadian support for US boats operating in its waters, including those passing through the Northwest Passage. Up until the June 2022 announcement by Canadian Defence Minister Anita Anand that funding of more than 40 billion Canadian dollars would be provided for the modernisation of NORAD capabilities over 20 years,¹² there had long been concern among Canadian security experts that without long-term commitment on the part of Canada, the United States might not be willing to continue to contribute its own share of the common defence effort to the same extent in future.

The United States as a “Reluctant” Arctic State

One of the most salient points that Canadian and US policy have in common is that their respective Arctic regions have hardly ever been a focus of interest for political leaders of either country. This was especially true of the part of Alaska that lies north of the Arctic Circle and the surrounding waters, a region that is now the focus of American Arctic policy. With a population of far less than one million, the region was long considered relatively insignificant, not only demographically.¹³ Some scholars even go so far as to say that it was not until the state's former governor Sarah Palin was nominated as the Republican vice presidential candidate in 2008 that larger segments of the US population became aware of Alaska again – if indeed they ever had been before. This is one of the reasons why the literature repeatedly describes the United States as a “reluctant” Arctic power.¹⁴

For a long time, the Arctic was not the focus of US politics.

Nonetheless, a succession of official US government documents detail the country's Arctic strategy under different administrations after the end of the Cold War. These documents also reflect how the US view of the Arctic has changed over the years:

- Presidential Decision Directive/NSC-26 of 9 June 1994¹⁵ contains statements on both the Arctic and the Antarctic, but was not widely disseminated and is therefore considered largely irrelevant.
- Much more effective was the National Security Presidential Directive NSPD-66 of 9 January 2009, issued in the last days of the George W. Bush administration.¹⁶ Here, the United States declares itself to be an Arctic nation. Still influenced by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the

document reveals a broader understanding of national security that recognises the security interests of the United States in the Arctic, while at the same time addressing new aspects such as the work of the Arctic Council, the resource potential of the region and climate change. The paper is considered the first comprehensive reassessment of US Arctic policy in a long time and a starting point for further initiatives undertaken by the Obama administration.¹⁷ A move of this kind had become necessary: other states had since expanded their Arctic activities, and the impression was starting to prevail in the United States that such issues as resource rivalry could potentially heighten the risk of a military conflict in the region.¹⁸ This concern was also expressed at the time in public statements made by Alaskan politicians, who referred to the risks to oil production in the state.¹⁹ This was also the point at which the idea of protecting this key resource entered the US strategic discourse on the Arctic.

In 2019, US Secretary of State Pompeo voiced harsh criticism of the influence of China and Russia in the Arctic.

- Barack Obama was the first US president to visit the Arctic during his term in office.²⁰ His administration's National Strategy for the Arctic Region had been published two and a half years earlier, on 10 May 2013. The strategy was criticised by experts as being too unspecific and failing to include aspects such as replacement plans for the ageing US icebreaker fleet and the development of deep-water ports.
- In December 2017, Donald Trump became the first US President to release a National Security Strategy in his first year in office – only the second document of its kind to mention the Arctic. His administration



regarded the protection of the most important resources for US energy dominance as being of vital significance. The resource potential of the approximately one million square miles of the US Arctic, including the relevant exclusive economic zone, was quantified by the US Coast Guard as follows:²¹ three billion US dollars in economic volume of the fish and seafood industry in Arctic Alaska, 90 billion barrels of undiscovered oil reserves in the Arctic, an



New priorities: After having played a rather subordinate role in the security policy considerations of the United States for a long time, the Arctic region is now increasingly becoming a focus of interest. Photo: © U.S. Army, ZUMA Press, picture alliance.

estimated 30 per cent of the world's undiscovered natural gas, and one trillion dollars' worth of rare earths in the Arctic. In addition, concrete security policy aspects came to the fore in view of Russia's growing military presence and China's visibly increasing Arctic interests.²² On the sidelines of the 2019 Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting

in Finland, the then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a speech in which he underlined US security interests in the Arctic and voiced unexpectedly harsh criticism of the influence of China and Russia in the region. This put the Arctic on the agenda of the major international powers once and for all.²³

- The most recent US Arctic strategy was drawn up by the Biden administration and presented to the public on 7 October 2022.²⁴ In it, the United States reaffirms its commitment to being an Arctic nation, rating climate change as a key factor for the further development of the Arctic. Washington aims to advance US interests in the Arctic through four mutually reinforcing pillars that encompass both domestic and international issues: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development as well as international cooperation and governance.
- Regional cooperation is also seen as vital in a context that concerns all Arctic nations: while Canada explicitly refers to climate change, the United States initially preferred other terms. It was not until the publication of its most recent strategy papers that the US began to use the same clear language. Today, the realities are acknowledged in US documents too; for example, the US Coast Guard strategy documents refer to thinner ice and particularly to reduced ice cover near the coast in the Arctic.²⁶

United States and Canada: A Comparison of Arctic Strategies

The Achilles heel of any maritime activity in the North American Arctic is and remains the ability (or inability) to implement existing strategies. Among other things, the effectiveness of a strategy can be measured in terms of how much political will there is to implement it and the degree to which adequate financial resources are available.

A comparison of US and Canadian strategies in the Arctic shows that there are in fact more similarities than differences, even though US rhetoric over the past four to five years has been in striking contrast to the Trudeau government's restraint, initially suggesting that the two countries might be pursuing very different policies. Examples of points in common include the following:

- The respective government documents of both countries list “strengthening the rules-based order” in the region as being among the top priorities. This includes not only protecting national sovereignty, but also acknowledging that making the Arctic a “shared region” depends on Arctic nations constructively addressing common challenges. Regional cooperation – based on internationally recognised principles such as national sovereignty – is in the interests of the United States and Canada and contributes to a secure and stable Arctic.²⁵

- In addition, both Canada and the United States recognise that Arctic communities, including Alaska Natives and indigenous peoples, will be at the forefront in the process of adapting to change in the Arctic. It seems that the United States, which (like Canada) has a very tense relationship with its indigenous peoples, is beginning to realise that it makes sense to consult and work with local groups when it comes to expanding activities in the Arctic.²⁷ Finally, it is also worth noting that adequate funding for implementation does not seem to be available to achieve the objectives set out in either of the strategies. The US Arctic Strategy does suggest that cost is an issue, stating that it will examine its “capabilities, posture, operations, and activities necessary for deterrence in the Arctic [...] in a strategy-driven and resource-informed way”.²⁸

It is estimated that Russia currently has 20 to 25 times more icebreakers than the US.

The North American Arctic and the Return of Superpower Politics

When NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Canada in August 2022, he publicly noted that Russia's war against Ukraine had fundamentally changed the framework for global security.²⁹ Diplomatically adopting

Canada's long-standing formula "High North – low tension", he legitimised his hosts' idealistic vision of the Arctic while at the same time confronting them with Russia's wide-ranging military rearmament measures in recent years, leaving no doubt as to the urgent need for broad and resolute action on the part of NATO to counter that not entirely new threat. The message was not something that the hosts had not heard before: after all, their own official conclusions leave nothing to be desired in terms of clarity – "Canada's Arctic is vulnerable. Defence infrastructure is outdated or non-existent".³⁰ In addition, there is no lack of current research on the topic, although this is only very reluctantly acknowledged, if at all – especially the research from foreign sources.³¹ The fact is that the Arctic remains the theatre of deployment for all actors who might threaten the security of North America,³² and it is ultimately up to Canada to ensure that attacking the United States via the Canadian Arctic is not something that potential military adversaries might regard as a promising option. In a worst-case scenario, it is currently doubtful that this can be ruled out.

As activity in the Arctic increases, so do the demands on security in terms of search and rescue, as well as capabilities for detecting, deterring and engaging potential adversaries. It should be noted that none of the fleets (whether the US or Canadian Navy or the US Coast Guard) has the capability or the capacity to provide a sustained maritime surface presence in the high latitudes.³³

Reflecting the lack of military interest in the Arctic that prevailed up until 2014, not only in Canada, there was a decline in the number of submarines³⁴ – generally regarded in the long-term security concepts of all Arctic naval powers as being the most important instrument. Today, for example, Canada's underwater fleet comprises four submarines of the so-called Victoria class acquired second-hand from the United Kingdom in 1998: more than 40 years old, they have mainly been in the headlines due to their numerous defects and lack of seaworthiness.³⁵ What is more, only one of

them is currently operational – a grotesquely small number given that the country has thousands of kilometres of coastline. In view of the challenges involved, the maritime hardware of the United States in relevant areas is likewise in need of significant expansion, at least in quantitative terms. It is estimated that Russia currently has 20 to 25 times more icebreakers than the US.³⁶ The fact that there is a Coordinator for the Arctic Region within the US State Department³⁷ and that this position has been filled with a diplomat admired by Canadian experts for his experience in dealing with "great power politics"³⁸ seems advantageous, but not exactly a "major coup".

Since taking office, Russian President Vladimir Putin has modernised Russia's nuclear arsenal and delivery systems. Many of these weapons systems are stationed in the Arctic, making the region one of the most important and dangerous strategic locations in the world. Yet this line of thinking is something Canadian leaders barely subscribe to. In contrast, after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the United States did indeed refocus on this issue. It is clearly not in Canada's interests for either Russia or China to conclude that North America is vulnerable to new weapons systems. In view of the Canadian government's completely different set of priorities, however – with an agenda of identity politics and welfare state expansion – it remains unclear whether it is serious about the issue and is actually prepared to pay for more military security, as promised.

– translated from German –

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