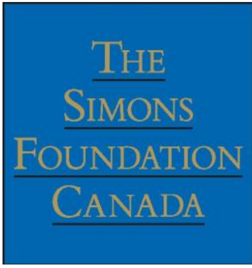

ARCTIC SECURITY BRIEFING PAPERS

Prepared by Ernie Regehr, O.C., Senior Fellow in Arctic Security and Defence

January 14, 2025

The Imperative to Talk With Adversaries Includes the Arctic

Among its strengths, Canada's new* Arctic Foreign Policy *(AFP)*[1] *upholds diplomacy as "a first line of defence for Canada's national security." For now, however, it seems this "line of defence" is to remain somewhat idle when it comes to dealing with the adversary identified as a prime threat to our security. The insistence that a return to political engagement and cooperation with Russia, including in the Arctic, must await the end of its war on Ukraine is a sharp departure from past practice. In the face of similarly egregious transgressions, direct engagement with the Soviet Union persisted throughout the Cold War, in the interests of both accountability and strategic stability. The AFP rightly rejects "business as usual" with Russia, but that should not translate into ignoring critically important business at hand in the Arctic – especially the recovery of strategic stability and addressing the gathering climate catastrophe at the regional level.

The strengths of Ottawa's freshly articulated Arctic foreign policy include:

- the promise of invigorated relations with northern indigenous communities, including on national security matters;
- the clear identification of climate change as "the most pressing and the most proximate threat to Canada's security in the Arctic and the people who live there;" and
- the ambition to assert Canadian "leadership on Arctic governance and multilateral challenges."

Furthermore, the AFP commits to Arctic diplomacy that is informed by and benefits from northern Indigenous Peoples, and in doing so it acknowledges "the damaging impacts of colonialism." It anticipates "a renewed Inuit-Crown and nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples" and promises to uphold them "as active partners in the conduct of international relations in the Arctic."

At the launch of the AFP, Natan Obed, President of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, reminded Canadians that the Inuit homeland in Canada, Inuit Nunangat, "makes up 40 percent of Canada's land area and all of its Arctic coast line." He said Inuit are "committed to continue work to ensure that Inuit and Canada jointly deliver on the AFP's strong ambitions." The President of Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada, Lisa Qiluqqi Koperqualuk, also committed to working with the federal government to ensure that Canada's Arctic policies "uphold Inuit self-determination, including our full and effective cooperation."

The diplomacy imperative

The AFP offers a compelling description of the fundamental objective of international diplomacy:

> "Effective diplomacy is critical for shaping the international environment to defend and advance Canadian national interests; it is a first line of defence for Canada's national security. Canada's fundamental defence and security goal is to prevent and defuse potential crises before they can develop into conflict."

Defusing strategic crises and tensions to prevent armed conflict really is central to sustainable Arctic defence, and it's not too late. The expert and military consensus is, as the AFP puts it, that "the risk of military attack in the North American Arctic remains low."[2] Keeping that at low and manageable levels is a critical objective of the Arctic foreign policy, but it's also a military objective.

Military preparedness for an armed combat prevention role must include timely emergency response capacity and supportive infrastructure, significant upgrading of which is required due to the increased access driven by climate change. Domain awareness, along with monitoring and controlling air and sea approaches to Canada in the Arctic, is ongoing and upgrading those capabilities is a focus of current NORAD modernization. Threats[3] from new military technologies, like hypersonic missiles, are emerging, but they are aimed more at targets in the Canadian and American heartlands than in the Arctic, although some elements of the envisioned layered defences will inevitably involve the Arctic – also a focus of NORAD modernization.

Inasmuch as preventing military attacks and keeping the threat of attack at a low level requires "effective diplomacy," as the AFP puts it, there is no getting around the need to reach beyond the stated intention of deepening ties with "like-minded states." It has to mean engaging with the states that are deemed central to undermining those objectives. Even if both sides of the current Arctic divide are resigned to ongoing strategic competition, direct political engagement between them remains essential.

Of course, the myriad complications and nuances in dealing with implacable foes will be better appreciated by seasoned practitioners than by external critics, and it is widely understood that "business as usual" with Russia is currently not available, but finding meaningful engagement opportunities should remain the objective.

As Canada's Ambassador to Russia, Sarah Taylor, makes clear in a *Globe and Mail* report,[4] she and her colleagues in Moscow face "a somewhat hostile atmosphere" and instances of "quite aggressive" surveillance, but she also acknowledges that the policy of "limited engagement" is an additional constraint. She nevertheless affirms the importance of being present in Russia, "because there are contacts you can have," and she indicates there are still academics, analysts, and civil society groups that can be consulted, albeit under challenging circumstances.

The United States, Russia, and China became deeply and inextricably codependent partners in strategic security when they embraced the nuclear weapons driven strategy of deterrence through the promise of mutually assured destruction. Canada and its NATO partners became enmeshed in the same co-dependency trap when they in turn embraced nuclear weapons and began to treat them as if they were "the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance," a phrase faithfully repeated in NATO documents, including in para 29 of the Alliance's current (2022) Strategic Concept.[5]

Any failure in deterrence strategy portends annihilation, so until this MAD system is replaced by something more sane than relying on the threat of, and preparations for, global destruction (the point of ongoing nuclear "modernization"), nuclear adversaries can't responsibly avoid dealing with each other. Each needs to understand the other well enough to develop some basic confidence that they can be counted on to avoid the circumstances that could recklessly or inadvertently trigger the arsenals that are capable of destroying the planet. In the Cold War, that meant things like hotlines, some basic information sharing, exploring confidence building measures, accepting basic verification intrusions, and protracted arms control negotiations.

Indeed, in June 1973 the United States and the Soviet Union reached a formal Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War that "outline[d] the general conduct of both countries toward each other and toward third countries regarding the avoidance of nuclear war." In other words, diplomatic engagement with the enemy was not understood as a moral lapse or as legitimizing the egregious misdeeds of the other, but as a key tool for dealing with adversaries (the nuclear version of holding your friends close and your enemies closer).

Diplomacy was part of the process of seeking to hold each other accountable, and, in the face of myriad obstacles, for pursuing mutually beneficial security measures to reduce tensions and ultimately avert catastrophe. The ongoing arms control negotiations were essential for both sides to step back from the brink of global catastrophe. More than that, diplomatic engagement with an entrenched adversary was also trusted as a means of pursuing important joint achievements, like those of the Helsinki process.

The 1972 SALT I (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) agreement was negotiated while the United States was aggressively pressing its controversial war on North Vietnam, with the Soviets arming the North. The follow-up SALT II negotiations had reached agreement by 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. That seriously disruptive event meant the US Senate would (among other reasons) not ratify the agreement, but through ongoing diplomacy both sides agreed to abide by its terms.

During the course of the devastating 10-year Soviet-Afghanistan war, while the Americans armed and assisted the anti-Soviet forces, East/West talks continued. By the mid-1980s, at the height of the Soviets' illegal war on Afghanistan, Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan met in Iceland, and in 1987, that war still raging, they signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

Both the Vietnam War and the Afghan War coincided with the Helsinki Process,[6] an extended set of East-West meetings designed to reduce Warsaw Pact/NATO tensions, address a range of human rights and political freedoms, and to foster East-West economic, scientific, and humanitarian cooperation. The Helsinki Accord was signed in 1975, and that led to a series of follow-up meetings. In 1985, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan still in full force, Canada hosted a meeting on human rights with full Soviet participation. All of the negotiations and conferences were fraught and difficult affairs, but the point is, they persisted and constructive results followed.

In the current descent toward another instalment of East/West cold warfare, talking to the "enemy" is rejected by both sides – meanwhile, the dangerous threats of nuclear use and the disintegration of the nuclear arms control and disarmament infrastructure are combining to produce a uniquely dangerous strategic environment. And that environment is made more dangerous by the refusal of the key adversaries to mount proper talks. In the most recent issue of *Arms Control Today*, the retired American senior diplomat Thomas Countryman, a veteran of talks and negotiations, has challenged "the two biggest nuclear powers…to find a way to discuss all elements that bind them together in nuclear danger."[7]

In today's Arctic, all eight of the region's states are also bound together in mutual danger – notably, in the dangers of an unattended climate crisis in a region of the world egregiously affected, and in the building East/West confrontation in the European Arctic.

Arctic states have actually long affirmed their deep interdependence in the management of the region. In 2008, through the Ilulissat Declaration, the five states with Arctic Ocean shorelines understood that interdependence and declared their commitment to "cooperation," which they described as "a prerequisite for addressing these challenges." They went on to say that they:

> "…currently cooperate closely in the Arctic Ocean with each other and with other interested parties. This cooperation includes the collection of scientific data concerning the continental shelf, the protection of the marine environment and other scientific research. We will work to strengthen this cooperation, which is based on mutual trust and transparency, inter alia, through timely exchange of data and analyses."

That "mutual trust" was clearly shattered with Russia's active interference and then full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but that does not mean the Ilulissat Declaration's assertion that some level of cooperation is "a prerequisite for addressing these challenges" is now inoperative. While security cooperation, which remains a prerequisite for addressing the region's challenges, is deemed in the present environment to be out of reach, it remains a moral imperative for Arctic states to at least pursue diplomatic engagement toward rebuilding trust and rekindling cooperation.

A May 2024 analysis by a German think tank,[8] for example, calls for informal dialogue with Russians on the Arctic, including through Track II engagements, to address conditions for security and stability in a post-Ukraine war context. In an environment of heightened military patrols, given the need to reduce misunderstandings and misperceptions that risk unintentional escalation, analyst Michal Paul, also envisions "dialogue between military experts from all eight Arctic states" in a "process in which confidence-building measures are developed." And he points to the OSCE's[9] extensive work on just that.

The AFP emphasizes that "…bilateral cooperation between Canada and Russia, including in the Arctic, will remain exceedingly difficult for the foreseeable future," but that Canada will continue "limited engagement" through multilateral institutions. The distinction between "engagement" and "cooperation" is important, and now is the time for more intense and persistent engagement, a key tool for pursuing accountability, addressing differences/irritants, and for painstakingly building trust and confidence across divides. Pan Arctic cooperation with the current Kremlin is clearly more challenging, but as Amb. Countryman puts it, at this point in the overall strategic relationship, "it is less important to have high level, high visibility events than to begin and sustain regular discussions at middle levels."

The Ukraine war will inevitably end, and signs point to an increasingly consequential mutually-hurting-stalemate that could drive the parties to the table. And inasmuch as the Ukraine war is a key factor in precipitating the Arctic's current and hardened divide, an end to the war will open new opportunities.

Ottawa's declared intention in the AFP, to take on a leadership role and emphasize inclusion, is unlikely to be fully effective in an Arctic with the Russian half of the region absent from the relevant tables. It may be some time before Russia deigns to formally join such tables, but Canada, and its Arctic partners, should actively pursue engagement, at whatever levels possible, towards reconvening Arctic governance, scientific/climate action, and security tables that are inclusive – to face mutual accountability and to demonstrate a willingness to return to the more constructive Arctic relations that were shown to be possible in the recent past.

Endnotes

---

[1] Global Affairs Canada, *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*, December 2024. https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/transparency-transparence/arctic-arctique/arctic-policy-politique-arctique.aspx?lang=eng

[2] The Chair of the Yukon Arctic Security Advisory Council, Prof. Ken Coates, agrees that the Canadian Arctic is now safe, but that "you have to prepare for 15, 20 and 30 years down the line." CBC News, "Canada's new Arctic security council to help prepare territory for a changing world," 04 January 2024. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/yukon-arctic-security-advisory-council-1.7074525

[3] The AFP also identifies serious non-military security threats, and none of those can, unfortunately, be characterized as "remaining low." Climate change, cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, and foreign interference are all clearly present with consequences already felt and require responses.

[4] Mark MacKinnon, "Frozen out and under watch, envoy to Russia sees echoes of a hostile past," *Globe and Mail*, 30 December 2024. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-frozen-out-but-forging-ahead-canadas-ambassador-to-russia-sees-echoes/

[5] NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 29 June 2022. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

[6] The preparatory talks began in 1972 and the process was formally launched in 1973, leading to the accord in 1975 and then a series of follow-up meetings going well into the 1980s.

[7] Thomas Countryman, "Reducing the Russian Nuclear Danger: A Way Forward," *Arms Control Today*, December 2024. www.armscontrol.org

[8] Michael Paul, "Back to the Future of the Arctic" The Enduring Relevance of Arms Control," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, May 2024. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C18_FutureArctic.pdf

[9] Confidence and Security Building Measures, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. https://www.osce.org/secretariat/107484