

At Opposite Poles: Canada's and Norway's approaches to security in the Arctic

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Abstract

Canada and Norway are similar in many ways. They share a strong commitment to international law and humanitarian issues, consistently rank amongst the most developed countries in the world, and have aligned themselves with the United States on security matters. They are also two of the five Arctic coastal states that have most actively engaged in northern issues over the last decade. Yet, on the issue of security in the Arctic, their interests have historically differed. This difference came to the fore during the governments of Stephen Harper (2006–2015) and Jens Stoltenberg (2005–2013). This article compares the divergent approaches to security and national defence in Canada and Norway under the Harper and Stoltenberg governments. It asks what role traditional military concerns in the circumpolar region had for the two countries during the period, and how threat perceptions in Ottawa and Oslo shaped their respective Arctic policies. We argue that, to understand the contrasting approaches to Arctic security, two factors are key: (1) the inherent difference in the two countries' approach to, and utilisation of, NATO as a defence alliance; and (2) a clear difference in the role the Arctic holds for security considerations in the two countries given their disparate geographic locations. Ultimately, we make the case that to understand the different approaches adopted by Canada and Norway during the period examined, the Arctic needs to be understood not as one uniform region, but instead as a series of sub-regions where the dominant security variable—Russia—is present to a greater or lesser degree.

Keywords: NATO, Arctic, security, Russia, defence, Canada, Norway

Introduction

At first glance, Canada and Norway share many similarities, ranging from fairly small populations relative to their geographic size, to their reputations as bastions of untouched wilderness. These similarities extend to conceptions of their foreign and security policies. Historically, the two countries have actively worked to promote international cooperation on topics such as human rights, the role of the United Nations, and humanitarian issues more generally. The strong human rights dimension of Canadian foreign policy emerged in the wake of WWII. It remains central today in Canada's political identity, and shares important parallels with the "policy of engagement" and internationalism found in Norwegian foreign policy.¹ A clear expression of this is the Lysøen Declaration of 1998, in which the Foreign Ministers of both countries affirmed their common values, emphasised the promotion of human security,² and agreed to work towards the implementation of the Ottawa Treaty on anti-personnel mines. Finally, both Canada and Norway have, over the past decade, highlighted their Arctic areas as a priority for both domestic and foreign policy purposes.³

This is not to say that Canada and Norway share identical foreign and security policies. The Arctic, where the security interests of the two countries diverge, aptly illustrates this point. While there have always been differences between the two countries, these became particularly evident during Stephen Harper's Conservative government (2006–15) in Canada and the Red-Green coalition government led by Jens Stoltenberg in Norway (2005–13). When Russia adopted a more self-assertive policy towards the region from 2006–7 onwards, Norway called for increased NATO engagement in the Arctic and the development of an explicit NATO Arctic policy.⁴ While not disputing NATO's collective defence role in the north, Canada rejected both the possibility of a more active role for the security alliance in the region and the need for a specific Arctic policy.⁵ Why were Norwegian and Canadian security interests different in the

¹ Arthur, *Rise and Fall of a Middle Power*; Haglund, "And the Beat Goes On: 'Identity' and Canadian Foreign Policy." On Norway see Tamnes, *Oljealder 1965-1995, Norsk utenrikspolitisk historie (Oil Age: Norwegian History of Foreign Policy)*.

² Human security was a concept that was promoted by both Canada and Norway in the early 1990s. It was meant to offer an alternative to the dominant, state-centric concept of security.

³ Griffiths, "Towards a Canadian Arctic Strategy"; Hønneland and Rowe, *Nordområdene - Hva Nå? (The High North - What Now?)*.

⁴ Tamnes, "Arctic Security and Norway."; Flikke, "Norway and the Arctic: Between Multilateral Governance and Geopolitics."

⁵ Interview with Former Canadian Diplomat, Global Affairs Canada, Vancouver, BC: January 9, 2017; Interview with Government Official Canada II, Directorate of NATO Policy, Global Affairs Canada, Copenhagen, October 12, 2016; Hilde, "Armed Forces and Security Challenges in the Arctic."; Ivison, "Canada under Increasing Pressure to

Arctic? Did this reflect a shift in underlying security priorities in one (or both) of the two countries mentioned, or did it instead highlight fundamental differences in how the countries understand security in the Arctic?

This article is based on a number of structured and semi-structured interviews with Canadian and Norwegian security officials working in both the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, as well as former diplomats dealing with this portfolio in 2006–2015.⁶ Drawing on these interviews and numerous published sources, we argue that the different approaches to the Arctic adopted by Norway and Canada during the period examined stemmed from two key factors: (1) the inherent difference in the two countries' approach to and utilisation of NATO as a defence alliance; and (2) a clear difference in the role the Arctic holds for security considerations in the two countries. This leads us to argue that, more fundamentally, the Arctic needs to be understood as not one region, but a series of sub-regions where the dominant security variable is Russia. The assumption that the Arctic constitutes a single, coherent, and uniform region in terms of security interests – *one* region where the security interests of all the Arctic states are inherently intertwined – is often promoted by scholars and the media alike.⁷ Given the persistence of statements concerning the possibility of conflict in the north, we stress a more nuanced view of Arctic security.

The literature on Arctic security issues encompasses a variety of definitions of “security.” While recognising the whole range of security studies and the interlinkages between the different types of security and safety, this article focuses on the traditional, state-centric concept of security – what is often referred to as military security.⁸ We begin with a brief discussion of the debate on security in the region and a historical overview of the key policy features of the Canadian and Norwegian governments during the early years of the new millennium.

Security in the Arctic

Some scholars point to the potential for armed struggle over resources or territory in the Arctic.⁹ Others argue this is unlikely, although the regional relationships between Russia and other states in the region cannot be completely separated from the deterioration of the relationship between Russia and the West.¹⁰ At the same time, military activity in the Arctic is at a level not seen since the end of the Cold War.¹¹ Most visibly, Russian bombers regularly fly along the North

Come up with Co-Ordinated NATO Response to Russia in Arctic.”; “Canadian PM and NATO S-G Discuss Afghanistan, the Strategic Concept, and the Arctic.” (WikiLeaks Cable).

⁶ See the List of Interviews at the end of this article.

⁷ For a range of approaches to this issue, see Young, “Whither the Arctic? Conflict or Cooperation in the Circumpolar North.”; Exner-Pirot, “What is the Arctic a Case of? The Arctic as a Regional Environmental Security Complex and the Implications for Policy.”; Padrtová, “The Arctic Regional Security Complex?”; Welch, “The Arctic and Geopolitics.”; Weber, “Security Fears Growing in the Arctic Region: Survey.”; Greaves and Lackenbauer, “Re-Thinking Sovereignty and Security in the Arctic.”; and Borgerson, “Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming.”

⁸ Hoogensen Gjørsv and Goloviznina, “Introduction: Can we Broaden our Understanding of Security in the Arctic?”

⁹ Borgerson, “Arctic Meltdown.” and “The Great Game Moves North.”; Huebert, “Submarines, Oil Tankers and Icebreakers.”

¹⁰ Tamnes and Offerdal, “Conclusion.” In *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic*; Keil, “The Arctic - A New Region of Conflict? The Case of Oil and Gas.”

¹¹ Expert Commission, “Unified Effort,” 17, 20.

Norwegian coast and across the North Pole. Russian military activity and investment in forces and infrastructure in the Arctic are often perceived as potentially threatening in other Arctic countries who are similarly discussing (re)investing in their northern capabilities.¹²

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been implicitly present in the Arctic since its founding in 1949 through five of its member states (Canada, the United States, Norway, Iceland and Denmark). With the growth of the Soviet Northern Fleet based on the Kola Peninsula, particularly from the 1960s, both the European Arctic and the North Atlantic were envisioned as potential theatres of conflict with the USSR during the Cold War. The European Arctic thus gradually grew in importance in NATO strategic and operational planning.¹³ The defence alliance has, however, never had an explicit *policy* for the region dealing with both military and political issues. In the late 2000s, arguments concerning the “new” challenges facing the Arctic—like search and rescue, environmental protection, and general domain awareness—were used to justify a larger NATO presence in the region.¹⁴ As Russian military activity in the north started to increase in 2007, Norway and Iceland also began arguing for the re-development of conventional military capabilities adapted for northern climates in order to shore up NATO’s credibility as a security provider.¹⁵ These approaches were counter-balanced on the one hand by the allies who considered the Arctic a distraction from more important issues, and on the other by those who argued that an active NATO engagement in the Arctic would harm relations with Russia and provoke unnecessary tension in the region.¹⁶ The ensuing debate was short-lived, however, as Canada firmly rebuffed the possibility of a larger role for NATO in the Arctic in 2009.¹⁷ Ottawa argued that it did not see a role for the alliance in dealing with the “softer” security challenges facing the region.¹⁸

Then, in 2014, tension between Russia and the West reached new heights with the annexation of Crimea and conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Sanctions were introduced by the United States, the European Union, and other countries such as Canada and Norway.¹⁹ The crisis also had an impact in the Arctic. Joint military exercises between NATO countries and Russia in the north—like Northern Eagle and Pomor—were cancelled or postponed indefinitely.²⁰ At the same time, both Russia and NATO countries continued to conduct larger military exercises in the

¹² Zysk, “Military Aspects of Russia’s Arctic Policy: Hard Power and Natural Resources.”; Danish Ministry of Defence, “Forsvarsministeriets fremtidige opgaveløsning i Arktis (Future Missions of the Danish Ministry of Defence in the Arctic).”; U.S. Coast Guard, “United States Coast Guard Arctic Strategy.”; and Expert Commission, “Unified Effort.”

¹³ Dyndal, “How the High North became Central in NATO Strategy.”

¹⁴ Speech by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer on security prospects in the High North, January 29, 2009; Hilde and Widerberg, “NATO’s nye strategiske konsept og Norge (NATO’s new strategic concept and Norway).”

¹⁵ Hilde, “The ‘new’ Arctic - the Military Dimension.”

¹⁶ Åtland, *Security Implications of Climate Change in the Arctic*.

¹⁷ Interview with Government Official Canada, Defence and Security Relations Division, Global Affairs Canada, Oslo, February 5, 2015); Interview with Government Official Canada II, Directorate of NATO Policy, Global Affairs Canada, [insert date?]; Haftendorn, “NATO and the Arctic: is the Atlantic alliance a Cold War relic in a peaceful region now faced with non-military challenges?”

¹⁸ Byers, *International Law and the Arctic*; Hilde, “Armed Forces and Security Challenges in the Arctic.”

¹⁹ European Union, “EU Sanctions against Russia over Ukraine Crisis.”

²⁰ Åtland, “North European Security after the Ukraine Conflict.”; Østhagen, “High North, Low Politics Maritime Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic.”

Arctic. The Ukraine crisis thus served to draw attention to the military security dimension in Arctic affairs.²¹ Attention shifted away from the “new” challenges that had proved divisive in NATO towards a traditional military security emphasis that was uncontroversial. Moreover, by 2014, some of the factors that had spurred interest in the Arctic after the turn of the century had disappeared or waned. Notably, expectations regarding the profitability of Arctic petroleum resources had been curtailed by the shale gas revolution and subsequent fall in petroleum prices.

Both the renewed emphasis on military security in the north since 2014 and a change in Canadian government have removed much of the basis for the Canadian-Norwegian disagreement over NATO’s role in the north. In 2017, the new Canadian government under Justin Trudeau released its new defence policy, “Strong, Secure, Engaged,” in which the Arctic was given a prominent role.²² The difference between the Norwegian and Canadian perceptions of Arctic security are thus less noticeable today than a few years ago. Yet, as we will highlight, they persist. The difference might have become less apparent within NATO, but is still relevant in the two countries’ security policies concerning the Arctic. We therefore ask: what are the underlying reasons for the Norwegian and Canadian approaches to Arctic security? To best answer this question, we first look at how Norway and Canada understand the Arctic.

Canada and the Arctic

It can be hard to pin down an exact definition of Canada’s Arctic. Generally defined as the three federal territories above the 60th parallel, the northern parts of some of the ten provinces also share important environmental and socio-economic similarities.²³ Other definitions commonly used include the area above the treeline and Inuit Nunangat, the Inuit homeland which stretches from the border with Alaska in the West to the northern parts of Québec and Labrador in the East. This massive swathe of land encompasses 40 percent of Canada’s landmass and 25 percent of the global Arctic, yet it is home to only 110,000 people.

A reoccurring theme in Canadian literature, the Arctic played an important role in nation building during the twentieth century. The idea of “the north” figures prominently in Canadian identity and is reflected in Québec with the notion of *nordicité*.²⁴ Yet, the distance from Canadian urban centres—most of which are located close to the U.S. border—to the Canadian Arctic, is considerable in any context. Whereas Norway is relatively well integrated and unified across its Arctic and non-Arctic territory,²⁵ Canada’s sheer vastness and harsh climate prompts a different reality with many communities accessible only by air, ice-road, or by sea during the ice-free months.

Given this vast, sparsely populated, and often inaccessible region, it perhaps comes as no surprise that Canada’s primary Arctic security and foreign policy concerns revolve around issues of sovereignty. In the words of political scientist Rob Huebert: “[t]he core issue of Canadian Arctic sovereignty is control; the core issue of Canadian Arctic security is about responding to

²¹ Barnes, “U.S. Navy Begins Arctic Exercise Amid Stepped-up Criticism of Russia.”

²² Government of Canada, “Strong, Secure, Engaged.”

²³ Government of Canada, “Canada’s Northern Strategy: Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future.”

²⁴ Lackenbauer, “Polar Race or Polar Saga? Canada and the Circumpolar World.”

²⁵ Not including the Svalbard Archipelago.

threats.”²⁶ And, even though relations with Canada’s two Arctic neighbours—Alaska in the West and Greenland in the East—are amicable, there are still two outstanding boundary disputes with both parties. For example, Denmark (on behalf of Greenland) and Canada disagree over the relatively insignificant Hans Island/Hans Ø.²⁷ A second dispute, with the United States, is over the dividing line in the Beaufort Sea (where there is potential for oil and gas). Paralleling the former Norwegian-Russian dispute from 2010, Canada argues for a line derived from their understanding of the 1825 treaty between Russia and Britain, while the United States stands on the median principle.²⁸

Arguably the greatest threat to Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic is the disputed status of the Northwest Passage.²⁹ Canada treats it as internal waters subject to Canadian jurisdiction, whereas the United States (and others) maintains that it is an international strait where foreign vessels, including military vessels, have the right to transit passage. The importance the Canadian government attaches to questions of sovereignty has led to some questionable policy decisions in the past, such as the forced relocation of Inuit families from northern Québec to the High Arctic Archipelago in the 1950s in order to “give evidence of ‘occupation’ as well as the presence of authority” that could be used to support Canada’s sovereignty claims.³⁰

Another incident occurred in 1985 when the U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker, *Polar Sea*, transited the passage from Greenland to Alaska on a resupply mission without seeking permission from the Canadian government. While the Canadian government had been informed of the voyage, it severely underestimated the public outcry that was to ensue. The 1988 Agreement on Arctic Cooperation was drafted in response and “pledges that all navigation by U.S. icebreakers within waters claimed by Canada to be internal will be undertaken with the consent of the Government of Canada.”³¹ This represented, in the words of then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, “a practical solution that is consistent with the requirements of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.”³² Taken together, these Arctic disputes have contributed to what has been called “sovereignty anxiety”: the perception that Canada is struggling to uphold its sovereignty in the Arctic and is thus prone to security threats in the region.³³

More recently, these issues came to the fore under the Conservative government that was in power from 2006 to 2015. Prime Minister Harper made Arctic security an important component of his campaign and emphasised upholding Canada’s sovereignty.³⁴ Throughout his years in office, the Prime Minister made Arctic security and Canada’s sovereignty central elements of his party’s brand: the Prime Minister made yearly visits during Operation Nanook, a “sovereignty operation exercise” initiated in 2007; funded and heavily publicised efforts to find

²⁶ Huebert, “Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security in a Transforming Circumpolar World,” 19–20.

²⁷ Byers, *International Law and the Arctic*.

²⁸ Sharp, “An Old Problem, a New Opportunity: A Case for Solving the Beaufort Sea Boundary Dispute.”

²⁹ Griffiths, “Arctic Security: The Indirect Approach.”

³⁰ Shadian, “In Search of an Identity Canada Looks North.”

³¹ “Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America on Arctic Cooperation.” (1988).

³² “Canada—United States: Agreement on Arctic Cooperation and Exchange of Notes Concerning Transit of Northwest Passage.”

³³ Lackenbauer, “Polar Race or Polar Saga? Canada and the Circumpolar World.”

³⁴ MacAskill, “Canada Uses Military Might in Arctic Scramble.”

Sir John Franklin's ill-fated Arctic expedition; and ordered Canadian scientists to revise their submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to include the North Pole.³⁵

During Harper's time in office, potential threats to Canada's Arctic were highlighted. In particular, Russian bombers and fighter jets flying close to Canadian Arctic airspace were used as an example of an imminent threat to Canadian sovereignty in the north.³⁶ These flights had become infrequent following the Cold War, but became more common after 2007. In response, the Conservative government increased the defence budget and initiated procurement projects, including stealth snowmobiles, Arctic drones, and controversial Arctic offshore patrol vessels.³⁷ This continued through the financial crisis in 2008, which affected Canada (like Norway), but overall left it relatively unscathed. The subsequent drop in oil prices compounded the financial strain on the government, however, and several of the Arctic projects were put on hold or scaled back.³⁸ This backpedalling on Arctic investment led some to label Harper's approach as "all talk, no action."³⁹

Others have debated the credibility of the threat posed by the Russian aircraft flying close to Canadian Arctic airspace. A comparative study of Russian flight behaviour found that those aircraft flying near the North American Arctic did not violate Canadian airspace; that the number of interceptions in the North American Arctic was quite small relative to the Baltics, the Sea of Japan, or the North Atlantic; and that the behaviour displayed by Russian planes was less aggressive in the Arctic.⁴⁰ Furthermore, as the Kremlin has an identical legal position concerning its Northern Sea Route, it has been careful not to compromise Canada's sovereignty—at least insofar as it could set a legal precedent that would affect them.⁴¹ Many have argued that a more pressing concern in the north is the persistent social and economic problems—ranging from food security to vulnerability to a changing climate—facing Canada's northern communities.⁴² And although Harper's approach to the Arctic softened towards the end of his premiership, the government's rhetoric and actions towards Moscow—including sanctions targeting Russia's northern oil and gas development—remained sharp after the Ukraine conflict in 2014.

Even the threats posed by the outstanding boundary disputes and the status of the Northwest Passage are relatively minor when considered in the context of the wider relationship between Canada and its neighbours. With regard to the United States, for example, the two countries have agreed to disagree on the legal status of the Northwest Passage while still

³⁵ Byers, "The North Pole is a Distraction."

³⁶ CBC News, "Canadian Fighter Jets Intercept Russian Bombers in Arctic."; Lackenbauer, "Mirror Images? Canada, Russia, and the Circumpolar World."; Wallin and Dallaire, *Sovereignty and Security in Canada's Arctic.*"

³⁷ Byers, "Why Canada's Search for an Icebreaker is an Arctic Embarrassment."

³⁸ Cox and Speer, "From a Mandate for Change to a Plan to Govern: A New National Defence Policy For A Dangerous World," 4.

³⁹ Byers, "Why Canada's Search for an Icebreaker is an Arctic Embarrassment."

⁴⁰ Lasserre and Têtu, "Russian Air Patrols in the Arctic: are Long-Range Bomber Patrols a Challenge to Canadian Security and Sovereignty?"

⁴¹ During the 1985 incident with the *USCG Polar Sea*, for example, the USSR came out in support of Canada's position diplomatically. See Howson. "The Canadian-American Dispute over the Arctic's Northwest Passage."

⁴² Perreault, "The Arctic Linked to the Emerging Dominant Ideas in Canada's Foreign and Defence Policy."; Furgal and Seguin, "Climate Change, Health, and Vulnerability in Canadian Northern Aboriginal Communities." ; Power, "Conceptualizing Food Security for Aboriginal People in Canada." .

cooperating behind closed doors and upholding national interests publicly.⁴³ In terms of actual military cooperation, the two countries maintain close ties, with the Canadian military placing a high importance on interoperability with American forces. Elsewhere, the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), established in 1957 to provide joint surveillance of potential air space threats in North America, is a testament to the close security relationship between the two countries. Over time, NORAD has become one of the foundations of defence collaboration between the United States and Canada, with the surveillance of the maritime domain added in 2006.⁴⁴ However, these arrangements are what Jockel and Sokolsky deem “remarkably informal” when framed in the broader context of North Atlantic security.⁴⁵

In sum, Canada’s approach to the Arctic during the Conservative government from 2006 to 2015 was Janus-faced. The Harper government’s strong rhetoric stood at odds with the apparent lack of credible military security threats faced in the Canadian Arctic. Had the threats been more pressing, it is unlikely that the proposed investments in Arctic security would have been scaled back as significantly as they were, or that Ottawa would have resisted a role for NATO in the Arctic so adamantly. As Whitney Lackenbauer elegantly surmises: “Anxiety about ‘using or losing’ our Arctic inheritance is more revealing of the Canadian psyche [...] than of objective realities.”⁴⁶ Instead, the challenges Canada faces in the Arctic are largely socio-economic and environmental. As political disputes are with close allies, there is limited risk that they will escalate into any form of military conflict.

Norway and the High North

The Norwegian definition of the Arctic is everything north of the Arctic Circle (66°34N). , Norway’s foreign policy generally distinguishes between the Arctic (referring essentially to the Arctic Ocean and the largely uninhabited territories in the High Arctic) and the more hospitable and populated parts of northern Norway and Svalbard, as well as the adjacent maritime and land areas in the European part of the Arctic. The latter are referred to as the ‘High North’.⁴⁷ Sparsely populated by European standards, the population of almost half a million in Norway alone is relatively high as compared to the North American Arctic. As one third of Norway’s territory and 80 percent of its maritime exclusive economic zone are found within the region, the Arctic is not isolated from larger national security and defence policies. Instead, the High North is central to security considerations in Norway.

While previous scholarship has examined the possibility of conflict over the Arctic’s resources,⁴⁸ the main consideration for Norway is its shared land and sea border with Russia.⁴⁹ Since the end of World War II, Norwegian security policy has concentrated on managing its

⁴³ Griffiths, “Arctic Security: The Indirect Approach,” 10–11; Griffiths, “Towards a Canadian Arctic Strategy.”

⁴⁴ Jockel and Sokolsky, “Continental Defence: ‘Like Farmers Whose Lands Have a Common Concession Line’.”

⁴⁵ Jockel and Sokolsky, “Canada and NATO: Keeping Ottawa In, Expenses Down, Criticism Out... and the Country Secure.”

⁴⁶ Lackenbauer, “From Polar Race to Polar Saga,” 73.

⁴⁷ Støre, “The High North and the Arctic: The Norwegian Perspective.”

⁴⁸ For some excellent overviews of this debate, see Keil, “The Arctic - A New Region of Conflict? The Case of Oil and Gas.”; and Grindheim, *The Scramble for the Arctic? A Discourse Analysis of Norway and the EU’s Strategies Towards the European Arctic*.

⁴⁹ Tamnes, *Oljealder 1965-1995: Norsk utenrikspolitisk historie (Oil Age: Norwegian History of Foreign Policy)*.

relationship with its eastern neighbour. In what is generally termed an asymmetric relationship, Norway has endeavoured to balance its military inferiority to Russia through membership of NATO and a bilateral relationship with the United States.⁵⁰ At the same time, Norway has been a strong supporter of multilateralism and cooperative solutions in its foreign policy.⁵¹ This has created a situation where, on the one hand, Norway has sought an active presence and engagement from the United States and its European allies, with the aim of deterring Russia. On the other hand, Norway has pursued multilateral cooperation with Russia in both international and regional organisations, ranging from the UN to the Arctic Council to regional cooperation in the Barents area.

The “Red-Green” Coalition government led by Jens Stoltenberg, consisting of the Labour party (red), the Socialist Left party (red/green), and the Centre party (agrarian green), took office in the autumn of 2005, and placed a strong emphasis on Arctic affairs. The Foreign Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, led the government’s High North drive.⁵² The Arctic moved to the forefront of Norwegian policy through a series of studies and parliamentary reports in 2003–2005 that highlighted the economic potential of the region.⁵³ This renewed interest was spurred particularly by economic interests in the Barents Sea from the petroleum sector, as fields further south in the North Sea are becoming depleted. The new government’s focus on the High North was also catalysed by events relating to Russia. Just as the new government took office, a crisis erupted with the failed arrest of the Russian trawler *Elektron*, highlighting both the significance and challenges of cooperation with Russia in the Barents Sea.⁵⁴

During the Stoltenberg government, the elevation of the High North was part of a deliberate focus on circumpolar cooperation by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry that was designed to counterbalance the bellicose statements concerning the conflict potential in the north.⁵⁵ In both foreign and domestic media, Foreign Minister Støre, as well as Prime Minister Stoltenberg, frequently stressed the region’s uniqueness as an area for cooperation.⁵⁶ Notably, in 2007, as the Russian scientist and parliamentarian Artur Chilingarov planted a flag on the North Pole seabed and helped draw worldwide attention to the region, Støre used the opportunity to emphasise multilateral cooperation.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Tamnes, “Arctic Security and Norway”; Tamnes, *Oljealder 1965-1995 (Oil Age)*.

⁵¹ Neumann et al., “Norge og alliansene: Gamle tradisjoner, nytt spillerom (Norway and the Alliances: Old Traditions, New Room for Manoeuvre).”

⁵² Jensen and Hønneland, “Framing the High North: Public Discourses in Norway after 2000.”

⁵³ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “St.meld. Nr. 30 (2004–2005): Muligheter og utfordringer i nord (No. 30 (2004-2005) to the Storting: Opportunities and Challenges in the North)”; Orheim et al., *NOU 2003:32 Mot Nord! Utfordringer og muligheter i Nordområdene (Official Norwegian Report: Towards the North! Challenges and Opportunities in the High North)*; Brunstad et al., *Big Oil Playground, Russian Bear Preserve Or European Periphery?*; ECON, “2025 Ringer i vannet (2025 Circles in the Water).”

⁵⁴ See Bigg, “Russia: Trawler Escapes Norwegian Coast Guard While Still Carrying Inspectors.”

⁵⁵ Jensen and Hønneland, “Framing the High North: Public Discourses in Norway after 2000”; Grindheim, “The Scramble for the Arctic? A Discourse Analysis of Norway and the EU’s Strategies Towards the European Arctic.”

⁵⁶ Støre, “Arctic State”; Moe, Fjærtøft, and Øverland, “Space and Timing: Why Was the Barents Sea Delimitation Dispute Resolved in 2010?”; Støre, “The High North and the Arctic: The Norwegian Perspective.”

⁵⁷ Grindheim, “The Scramble for the Arctic? A Discourse Analysis of Norway and the EU’s Strategies Towards the European Arctic,” 6–10.

The renewed emphasis on the Arctic also stressed the need to build a pragmatic bilateral relationship with Russia in order to manage cross-border issues, ranging from migration and trade to fish stocks, and to improve people-to-people cooperation on local and regional levels.⁵⁸ At the same time, in line with its traditional approach, Norway sought to avoid excessive bilateralisation through the use of multinational fora and organisations.

A highlight of this cooperative Arctic focus came in 2010, when Norway and Russia agreed to settle their boundary dispute in the Arctic. After four decades of negotiation, both sides agreed to delineate a maritime border in the Barents Sea. Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov and his Norwegian counterpart Støre subsequently co-authored an op-ed in the Canadian newspaper *Globe and Mail*, in which they asked Canada to take note: "if there is one lesson that the biting cold and the dark winters of the Arctic should teach us, it is that no one survives alone out there for long."⁵⁹

Yet, this message could be considered equally applicable to Norway's efforts to keep its allies engaged in northern affairs. Emphasis on cooperation with Russia did not diminish the overarching security concerns related to Russia. These concerns never entirely disappeared, but were seen as less pressing in the early to mid 2000s. Prior to 2005, and to a large degree from 2005 to 2007, traditional security aspects were almost absent from High North policy.⁶⁰

While cooperation continued to be highlighted in Norwegian foreign policy in general and the High North policy, the years 2007 and 2008 witnessed a clear shift in Norwegian security and defence policy, and therefore to some extent in its High North policy. From 2007 to 2014, security "enhanced" High North policy in the sense that concerns about Russia were framed as "the changing security environment in the Arctic/High North."⁶¹ Thus, while continuing to emphasise the need for good neighbourly relations with Russia, the Stoltenberg government also made the decision to modernise the Norwegian military: new submarines were added to the fleet and ageing F-16s were replaced with F-35s.⁶² Both decisions were clearly motivated by the potential for military challenge from Russia in the North. As we shall return to below, from 2008 securing NATO's and key allies' attention to Norwegian concerns in the North similarly became the core effort of Norwegian security policy. Russia was plainly the reason for these concerns, but Norwegian authorities rarely stated this explicitly, even in closed-door NATO settings. Only after the change of government in 2013, and Ukraine crisis in 2014, did the Norwegian authorities start to refer openly to Russia as a potential threat to be deterred.⁶³

Under the new "blue-blue" coalition government from 2013, a recalibration of Arctic expectations occurred.⁶⁴ The drop in the price of oil and natural gas, combined with the dramatic

⁵⁸ Hønneland, "Norsk-russisk miljø- og ressursforvaltning i Nordområdene (Norwegian-Russian Environmental and Resource Management in the High North)."

⁵⁹ Lavrov and Støre, "Canada, Take Note: Here's How to Resolve Maritime Disputes."

⁶⁰ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Norwegian Government's High North Strategy.;" Norwegian Foreign Ministry, "Norway's High North Strategy: Presence, Activity and Knowledge."

⁶¹ Norwegian Government, "Norway's Arctic Strategy: Between Geopolitics and Social Development."

⁶² Håkenstad and Bogen, *Balansegang: Forsvarets omstilling etter den kalde krigen (Balance: The Military's restructuring after the Cold War)*.

⁶³ See, for example, Expert Commission, "Unified Effort.;" Norwegian Intelligence Service, "Focus 2015."

⁶⁴ The minority coalition consisted of the Conservative party (blue) and the Progress party (blue), which had the support of the Liberal party and the Christian Democratic Party in parliament.

events in Ukraine in spring 2014, were key reasons. From 2014, as NATO gradually returned to emphasising collective defence at home, Norwegian security and defence policy became more detached from High North policy, as it shifted towards more traditional Cold War issues and geography.⁶⁵ Instead of promoting NATO engagement in the Arctic, Norway placed new emphasis on maritime issues and the North Atlantic in particular.⁶⁶ As a result, Norwegian High North policy—as a specific portfolio under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs—is today both low key and (almost) exclusively concerned with soft security issues. Norway’s relationship to the Arctic at large, however, is inherently intertwined with its relationship with Russia and, for the foreseeable future, will be determined to a large extent by Russian actions and development.⁶⁷

Explaining Differing Approaches

Despite the overlap in security priorities elsewhere in the world, the period from 2005 to 2015 revealed differing approaches by the governments of Norway and Canada to the security policies of their own northern areas. For each country, the Arctic embodies different conceptions of security. Norway—under the Stoltenberg government and Foreign Minister Støre—placed weight on cooperation with Russia and rhetorically downplayed security concerns, *even* as concerns over Russian military activity were growing. Norway’s approach had firm roots in history: it represented a balancing act in line with traditional Norwegian foreign policy in that it stressed good neighbourly relations, while at the same time emphasising deterrence, by drawing NATO and the United States close and through investment in national defence. In Canada, Stephen Harper’s Conservative government deployed bellicose rhetoric to paint Russia as an immediate concern in order to gain favour domestically, even as there were some in Canada who questioned the credibility of a Russian threat. Compared to Norway, however, Canadian defence investment directed towards meeting challenges in the Arctic remained limited.

To understand these contrasting approaches to Arctic security, we put forward two arguments relating to: (1) the inherent difference in the two countries’ approaches to, and utilisation of, NATO as a defence alliance; and (2) a clear difference in the Arctic’s role in security considerations in the two countries, given their different geographic locations.

NATO’s role in Norwegian and Canadian defence

The role of NATO varies greatly between the two countries. While both Norway and Canada are founding members of NATO, their engagement with, and understanding of, the alliance have shifted over time. This has been particularly true with regard to Canada. During the 1960s and 1970s, Canada’s commitment to the alliance waxed and waned. Canada had worked to develop NATO into a value-based transatlantic community—evident most notably in the Canadian insistence on including Article 2 in the North Atlantic Treaty, commonly referred to as “the Canadian article.”⁶⁸ Establishing cooperation with the United States through NORAD in 1957, however, served to strengthen the understanding of NATO as a Europe-centred alliance that was

⁶⁵ Expert Commission, “Unified Effort.”

⁶⁶ Søreide, “NATO and the North Atlantic: Revitalizing Collective Defense and the Maritime Domain.”

⁶⁷ Norwegian Intelligence Service, “Fokus 2016.”

⁶⁸ See, for example, Government of Canada, “Canada and the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949.”

of marginal relevance to Canada's security.⁶⁹ The election of Pierre Trudeau in 1968 brought a shift in defence considerations. Building on the public scepticism that had quietly grown during the 1960s, as well as the general perception that NATO was an alliance dominated by the United States for the defence of Europe, Prime Minister Trudeau contemplated leaving the alliance altogether. Instead, however, a major review of foreign policy in 1969 saw Canada's military contributions to the alliance in Europe cut drastically.⁷⁰ In part to waylay some of the concerns expressed by NATO allies about this reduction in forces, Ottawa pledged to deploy the Canadian Air-Sea Transportable Brigade (CAST) to Norway in the event of war.⁷¹ Although an important symbol of solidarity,⁷² the first deployment of CAST—roughly two decades later, in 1986—was beset by problems, in particular surrounding the pre-placement of military equipment in Norway. Despite a visit from the Norwegian Defence Minister, who reportedly argued for the continuation of CAST, the commitment was abandoned.⁷³

The end of the Cold War led to a renewed Canadian commitment to NATO, but also to a new debate on burdensharing and Canadian interests.⁷⁴ The “new NATO” placed greater emphasis on values and commitment, something Canada had traditionally promoted. Canada became one of the largest contributors to NATO operations in the Western Balkans—in line with the wider trend in Canadian (and Norwegian) foreign policy towards the turn of the century of replacing participation in UN-led missions with NATO operations.⁷⁵ In Afghanistan, the volatile southern province of Kandahar was the main area of focus for Canada's contribution from 2006. Canada lost 158 soldiers, and the unwillingness of European allies to share the burden in the south of Afghanistan provoked irritation in Ottawa and questions in Canada about the value of NATO.⁷⁶ Due to domestic political considerations, Norway was among the NATO members which refused to contribute troops to support the Canadian effort in Kandahar.⁷⁷

While the Harper government decided to end the country's combat role in Afghanistan in 2011, Canada became a major contributor to the NATO air operations over Libya in the same year. Canada's involvement in the assurance measures in the Baltic States and Poland, adopted at the Wales summit in 2014, further fits the picture of a committed ally that provides support where needed. Canada did, however, decide to withdraw from NATO's Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) program, as well as from the procurement program for NATO drones.⁷⁸ These decisions must be seen within the context of the shrinking defence budget; while certain projects received additional funding, overall defence spending fell to 1 percent of GDP in 2015.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, these decisions do suggest a Canadian reluctance to invest in NATO.

⁶⁹ Crosby, “A Middle-Power Military in Alliance: Canada and NORAD,” 37–38.

⁷⁰ Halloran, “‘A Planned and Phased Reduction.’”

⁷¹ Granatstein, *Canada's Army*.

⁷² Tamnes and Holtmark, “The Geopolitics of the Arctic in Historical Perspective.”

⁷³ Rempel, *Counterweights: The Failure of Canada's German and European Policy, 1955-1995*.

⁷⁴ Haglund, “Canada and the Atlantic Alliance: An Introduction and Overview.”

⁷⁵ Zyla, *Sharing the Burden: NATO and Its Second-Tier Powers*; Sokolsky, “Over There with Uncle Sam: Peacekeeping, the ‘Trans-European Bargain’, and the Canadian Forces.”

⁷⁶ Massie, “Canada's War for Prestige in Afghanistan: A Realist Paradox?”

⁷⁷ See, for example, Staveland, “Send norske styrker til Sør-Afghanistan (Send Norwegian forces to South-Afghanistan).”

⁷⁸ MacLachlan and Wolfrain, “End of a NATO Era?”

⁷⁹ Berthiaume, “Harjit Sajjan Defends Canada's Military Budget after Donald Trump Slams NATO ‘free Riders.’”

In comparison with Canada, the Norwegian approach to NATO was more straightforward and single-minded during the Cold War. As noted above, Norway sought to balance neighbourly relations with the Soviet Union through deterrence in the shape of NATO and the United States. Given the Norwegian policy of restraint, evidenced by its refusal to allow the stationing of allied combat troops in Norway during peacetime, Norway has traditionally sought to enhance the credibility (and visibility) of the deterrence through, among other means, the presence of NATO and allied forces in joint military exercises. Norway also sought commitments from allies that they would reinforce Norway in times of crisis. The CAST Brigade was one such commitment.⁸⁰

From 2007, in its effort to raise awareness of Arctic affairs within NATO, Norway tried to frame developments in the Arctic under the banners of “new” or “soft” security challenges, but the real security concern from a Norwegian perspective was Russia.⁸¹ Partly to avoid securitising the Arctic by depicting Russia as a potential threat, then Foreign Minister Støre instead sought to outline challenges that derived from increased commercial activity and presence in the Arctic.⁸² This led to confusion among Norway’s allies, as Norway seemed to be arguing for an increased NATO role in the north due to an increase in non-traditional security challenges, while also emphasising traditional concerns over Russian resurgence.⁸³ This was partially rectified in 2008, when Norway launched the “Core Area Initiative.” Aimed at getting NATO back to basics by re-emphasising close-to-home, traditional security concerns in areas such as the Arctic, the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean, the initiative was directed mainly at strengthening the NATO Command Structure – a traditional priority for Norway in NATO.⁸⁴

Canada, however, distanced itself from Norway’s position, and from 2009 blocked any text on the Arctic in NATO documents and any NATO Arctic initiatives.⁸⁵ Norway’s seeming emphasis on the need for NATO to perform civilian tasks in the Arctic did not correspond with Canadian interests in the alliance. It also did not speak to any direct military threat in the Canadian Arctic. If anything, the view in Ottawa was that Canada needed to invest in its own Arctic capabilities in anticipation of a more commercially active region.⁸⁶ Moreover, the potential intrusion of NATO into the Arctic played into Canada’s sovereignty anxiety: by introducing a larger player in the north, it both undermined Ottawa’s position of (relative) strength,⁸⁷ and added the possibility that the carefully crafted compromise with the United States on the legal status of the Northwest Passage might unravel.⁸⁸

⁸⁰ Børresen, Gjeseth, and Tamnes, *Allianseforsvar i endring 1970–2000 (Changing Defence through Alliances 1970–2000)*.

⁸¹ Tamnes, “Arctic Security and Norway.”

⁸² Haraldstad, “Embetsverkets rolle i utforming av norsk sikkerhetspolitikk: Nærområdeinitiativet (The role of the bureaucracy in shaping Norwegian security policy).”

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Norwegian Ministry of Defence, “Collective Defence in Today’s Security Environment”; Hilde and Widerberg, “NATOs nye strategiske konsept og Norge (NATOs new strategic concept and Norway).”

⁸⁵ Haftendorn, “NATO and the Arctic: Is the Atlantic alliance a cold war relic in a peaceful region now faced with non-military challenges?”

⁸⁶ Huebert, “Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security in a Transforming Circumpolar World.”

⁸⁷ Interview with Government Official Canada III, Canadian Delegation to NATO, Brussels, August 29, 2014.

⁸⁸ Byers, *Who Owns the Arctic?*, 59–74; Lackenbauer, “Polar Race or Polar Saga? Canada and the Circumpolar World.”

Whereas Norway's primary emphasis in NATO has always been on the collective defence of its territory, Canada's approach emphasises using the alliance to gain political capital (in particular with the United States). While political capital is also important for Norway, Norwegian governments see participation in operations as an investment in Norwegian security. For Canada, other political goals are considered salient. Participation for Canada, in other words, is more about foreign policy than security policy. Canada's comparatively large contribution in Afghanistan, for example, was designed, among other things, to curry favour with the United States.⁸⁹ From the Canadian perspective, NATO thus had little contemporary relevance to the challenges of the Canadian North beyond the collective defence role the alliance has always played.

Consequently, NATO serves different functions for the two countries in question. Canada does not need NATO in the Arctic to manage Russia, whereas Norway does. Where Norway sees NATO as its formalised defence guarantee, Canada has its own bilateral defence guarantees through NORAD and integration with USNORTHCOM (United States Northern Command).⁹⁰

Two very different Arctics

For both Norway and Canada, Russia is a key factor in Arctic security considerations—even if it is more rhetorical than real in the case of the latter. The argument is often made that melting Arctic sea ice is opening up the region. The geography of the Arctic is changing, and previously frozen security concerns are increasingly becoming relevant.⁹¹ This is an oversimplified portrayal of the Arctic and a misunderstanding of the fundamental role of geography in the north. As Norway and Canada illustrate, the geographic context matters.

The shared land and maritime border with Russia has dominated, and will continue to dominate, the security concerns of Norway. Performing a balancing act between neighbourly relations and maintaining a credible deterrence and defence of its own territory is the main task at hand. Norway's security concerns and neighbourly relations, however, do not reach across the Atlantic or the Arctic to Canada. Compared with Norway, Russia does not pose the same security concerns for Canada. Canada's airspace is occasionally "buzzed" by Russian jets, and concerns remain over "adversarial" cruise and ballistic missiles (and the concurrent need to modernise warning systems in the North).⁹² By comparison, however, the Russian Northern Fleet—Russia's core military asset in the Arctic—is located on Norway's doorstep.

While Canada's expansive geography in the Arctic creates socio-economic, environmental, and political challenges, it also provides a natural security buffer that mitigates potential security threats from the north. Any threatening land force would have to cross multiple geographical barriers just to reach the Canadian Arctic's northern shores, which, it could be argued, hold very little strategic value. As Canadian Chief of Defence General Walter Natyncyk quipped in 2009: "[i]f someone were to invade the Canadian Arctic, my first task would be to

⁸⁹ Massie, "Canada's War for Prestige in Afghanistan: A Realist Paradox?"

⁹⁰ The U.S. commander of USNORTHCOM also commands NORAD.

⁹¹ Mandraud, "Russia Prepares for Ice-Cold War with Show of Military Force in the Arctic"; Barnes, "Cold War Echoes Under the Arctic Ice"; Borgerson, "Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming."

⁹² Government of Canada, "Strong, Secure, Engaged."

rescue them.”⁹³ This stands in stark contrast to Norwegian security concerns. The European Arctic is the core arena for Norwegian defence activity and security interests. Norway also sees itself as “responsible” within the NATO alliance for the northern flank of the North Atlantic, meaning the Barents Sea and thus the European Arctic.⁹⁴

Instead of understanding the Arctic as one security region, it is necessary to recognise it as many different regions in which the real or perceived threat posed by Russia—and the policy considerations that threat evokes—varies. The significance of geography is undervalued when the Arctic is depicted as *one* uniform security region.⁹⁵ Despite the melting sea ice, the Arctic remains vast. Regardless of globalisation and the notion of an end of boundaries, geography and physical space still come into play, at least with regard to traditional security concerns for Norway and Canada.

This was further evidenced by the two countries’ reactions to Russian actions in Ukraine in 2014. If anything, Norway and Canada disagreed over how to relate to Russia in the Arctic after Moscow annexed Crimea. Norway, preferring a balanced approach, called for continued cooperation in Arctic-specific forums, while at the same time strengthening deterrence in the north.⁹⁶ Under Stephen Harper, the Canadian Government was outspoken in its criticism of Russia and did not see the Arctic as a separate issue. Instead, the Arctic became one of the few arenas in which Canada could attempt to punish Russia for its actions.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The lack of a coherent NATO policy for the Arctic exemplifies a crucial but often overlooked point: that the Arctic should not be understood as a single region – at least in terms of national security interests. Canada and Norway have divergent views on security in the Arctic, as their perceptions are informed by different realities and needs. Whereas NATO is integral to the Norwegian Arctic security context, it is less immediate and relevant for Canada. Canada’s security concerns in its northern territories are less state-centric and military-oriented than those of Norway, a reflection of the relative lack of credible state threats in the region. Thus, while the Norwegian emphasis on non-military concerns resonates with Canada on some levels, Ottawa does not see a role for NATO in handling such challenges. Moreover, and unlike the Norwegian case, defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Canada is less a matter for NATO than for the bilateral relationship between Canada and the United States. Norway and Canada share many priorities on the international stage, but this is not true of the Arctic. Their contrasting approaches are the result of differing understandings of what poses a threat in the Arctic and the best way to manage these threats—both of which are informed by their dramatically different geographic contexts. While it might be tempting to treat the Arctic as one uniform security region, in reality this obscures more than it illuminates.

⁹³ Hilde, “The ‘new’ Arctic - the Military Dimension.”

⁹⁴ Expert Commission, “Unified Effort.”

⁹⁵ See Dodds and Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles*.

⁹⁶ Karlsen, “Venter ikke angrep fra Russland. Men vi ligger der vi ligger (Do Not Expect Attack from Russia. But We Are Where We Are).”

⁹⁷ Rennie, “Stephen Harper Raises Spectre of Russian Threat in Arctic Speech to Troops”; Østhagen, “Ukraine Crisis and the Arctic: Penalties or Reconciliation?”

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