



Opinion

Canada must increase surveillance assets in the Arctic

True maritime domain awareness in the Arctic requires multiple overlapping systems that authorities can cross-reference to assess vessels operating in our internal waters.

BY PIERRE LEBLANC

Auditor General Karen Hogan's recent report highlighted that unauthorized vessels can easily navigate in the Canadian Arctic without being detected if they do not have an Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponder or if they turn their transponder off as North Korean and Russian vessels have done to avoid embargoes.

To have true maritime domain awareness in the Canadian Arctic requires multiple overlapping systems that would allow the federal authorities to cross-reference them to assess vessels operating in our internal waters and the waters of our Exclusive Economic Zones. The various systems will provide different data that can be cross-referenced to discover suspicious operators and trigger an investigation. And, if required, it can trigger specific actions by the appropriate department, be it Fisheries and Oceans, Environment Canada, the Canada Border Services



A Canadian Forces member surveys a North Warning System RADAR tower in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut during Operation NANOOK on Aug. 16, 2019. Canadian Armed Forces photograph by Aviator Melissa Gloude

Agency, or National Defence. The overlapping systems also provide some degree of redundancy if one of the surveillance systems becomes inoperable or is not replace in time.

As the auditor general's report revealed, these gaps were identified a long time ago. In 2000, I alerted Defence Management Council of the fact that global warming would open the Canadian Arctic and that we needed to increase our surveillance assets. My recommendations included naval vessels capable of operating in the Arctic, surveillance from space, high-frequency surface wave radars (HFSWR), designed to detect ships, to monitor the choke points to the Arctic Archipelago and sub-surface surveillance, among others.

At the same time, I was lobbying to make it compulsory for ships entering the Arctic

Archipelago to report to the Canadian Coast Guard Marine Communications and Traffic Services in Iqaluit, better known as NORDREG, which was a volunteer system then. Yes, it was voluntary. It finally became compulsory for vessels of 300 tons and above to report in 2010. To this date, smaller vessels still do not have to report. Given the concerns we now have with Russia and China, all vessels above 15 tons must be made to report to NORDREG, and all of them must have an AIS transponder on at all times. It is to the advantage of those vessels should an accident happen. Canadian authorities would then be able to direct other vessels in their vicinity to provide immediate assistance while federal search-and-rescue assets are being deployed.

I recommend that the Canadian-developed HFSWR system,

installed and tested in Nova Scotia years ago, be deployed to monitor vessel traffic at the Arctic Archipelago choke points. We need to identify vessels before they enter our waters to be able to stop them if need be. To that end, over 30 of the present North Warning System (NWS) radars could be reprogrammed to monitor the Northwest Passage and some of its approaches. Electro-optical and infrared cameras should be mounted high on the NWS radar towers to provide a view of suspected radar targets. Electrical power and satellite links are readily available on those sites. Defence Research and Development Canada has experience operating such systems in the Arctic through their Northern Watch program.

I recently recommended increasing the role of the Canadian Rangers by giving them a marine mission like the one they do so well on the ground. They can provide priceless information so that federal agencies can tailor their response accordingly. They have the capacity to remain on station until the appropriate federal assets are deployed. In these days of digital everything that can be jammed or corrupted, having personnel on the ground is valuable, if not essential.

To be true stewards of that beautiful and fragile part of our country, we must have complete domain awareness. Now that risks are rising further, it is time for action and investment in supporting infrastructure and arctic domain awareness assets.

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