

OPINION

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Canada is not equipped to defend its Arctic

The world's rules-based order is at great risk and Canada is not ready, especially in the Arctic.

Pierre Leblanc



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I have been in and out of the Canadian Arctic since 1972, when I conducted my first sovereignty foot patrol some 1,000 kilometres north of Inuvik, in the Northwest Territories. Later, I commanded the Canadian Forces Northern Area, based in Yellowknife, N.W.T., for five years. I travelled extensively in the Arctic, including Alaska and Greenland. During my retirement from the Canadian Forces, I spent two years managing the North Warning System, that line of 46 air defence radars deployed from Alaska to the south tip of Labrador. Since 2000, I have been providing independent military and policy advice on security and sovereignty in the Canadian Arctic to the defence industries and government officials from several federal and territorial departments. My experience has led me to one conclusion: at the moment, Canada is not equipped to defend its Arctic.

Global security is at its worst since I joined the Armed Forces in 1966. Russia continues its invasion of Ukraine. It has expansionist desires, and continues to be backed by North Korea and Iran. China is developing offensive weapon systems. It has promised to annex Taiwan by force, if need be, and is acting illegally in the maritime Exclusive Economic

Zones (EEZ) of Vietnam and the Philippines. The Middle East is on fire and many states are failing. All the while, access to the Canadian Arctic Archipelago is increasing with the progressive disappearance of sea ice.

U.S. President Donald Trump's musings about taking Greenland and the Panama Canal by force if need be is encouraging dictators to do the same. Since the president's comments, a Russian lawmaker has suggested that Russia should take over Svalbard which belongs to Norway, Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro is threatening to invade Puerto Rico, and China has begun patrolling the boundary of its nine-dash-line-claim, a huge part of the South China Sea.

The world's rules-based order is at great risk, and Canada is not ready, especially in the Arctic.

Since the recognition of the "peace dividend" that followed the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, most of our politicians have, to a large extent, ignored our country's national defence. For decades, we were fed a lot of good words and policy statements that seldom materialized into credible arctic defence assets, with a few exceptions such as the RADARSAT Constellation for surveillance from space, and the Arctic Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPVs).

Unfortunately, given our inefficient and politicized procurement system where political parties can cancel programs initiated by the previous government, the Canadian Forces have struggled to acquire and maintain critical defence assets. These require more than a decade to acquire given the technical complexity of the procurement system for major weapon systems. However, politicians' time horizon is set by the next election. The process to replace the CC-115 Buffalo search-and-rescue aircraft specifically designed to save Canadian



The Canadian Coast Guard Ship Louis S. St-Laurent approaches the Coast Guard Cutter Healy in the Arctic Ocean on Sept. 5, 2009. The two ships are taking part in a multi-year, multi-agency Arctic survey that will help define the Arctic continental shelf. Photograph courtesy of Patrick Kelly, U.S. Coast Guard

lives took 14 long years. The long-promised Nanisivik Naval Station in Nunavut—which was announced in 2007 and has been delayed multiple times and still not fully operational—is another good example. It is nearly impossible to get politicians to invest large sums in defence capital knowing that they may not be in power to reap the political benefits. They prefer vote-buying initiatives.

At the moment, the Royal Canadian Air Force is not properly equipped to fulfill its monitoring mission, much less conduct timely interceptions in its own Canadian Air Defence Identification Zone (CADIZ). The main reason is that it doesn't have the infrastructure in our Arctic to support such long-range operations.

The CF-18 fighter aircraft are based in Cold Lake, Alta., and Bagotville, Que., respectively, some 3,500 km and over 4,000 km from the north end of the CADIZ. If forward deployed in anticipation of operations, they could operate from the Forward Operations Locations in Inuvik, N.W.T. (being repaired) and/or Iqaluit,

Nunavut, respectively, some 2,300 km and 2,200 km from the north end of the CADIZ. Given the CF-18 combat range, the distances involved and the paucity of alternate airports, the fighters would require in-flight refueling from aircraft based at the Canadian Forces Base Trenton. They would also benefit from the support of an Airborne Warning and Control System to monitor the airspace, and to coordinate combat operations. There is the possibility of using the American Pituffik Space Base in Thule, Greenland, where F-35 have been deployed in 2023. Pituffik Space Base is still some 700 km from the Canadian Forces Station Alert at the very tip of Ellesmere Island, which may some day require combat air support.

The North Warning System—that line of 46 air defence radars stretching from Alaska to the eastern tip of Labrador—is still active, but its short-range radars, based on 1970s technology, are essentially obsolete. They are, on average, located some 1,700 kilometres south from the northern tip of the CADIZ. There are federal plans to deploy one

Polar Over the Horizon Radar and one Arctic Over the Horizon Radar. When operational, they will finally monitor Canadian airspace north of the NWS line and provide NORAD with that additional critical time to assess a threat and take appropriate action. These radars will not be in operation for many years.

After long political delays, Canada is finally acquiring the F-35: a modern, reliable, and agile fighter aircraft. Another of the bright spots is that the new P-8A Poseidon long range maritime patrol aircraft will improve our anti-submarine warfare and maritime surveillance following the great service of the CP-140 Aurora. Also, the new MQ-9B long range drones presently under construction will be a great addition for monitoring the Arctic, and increase the all-important "domain awareness," which is lacking in the Canadian Arctic according to the auditor general's 2023 Report Number 6.

I find that the threat "to the Arctic" is too often minimized. Recent NORAD commanders have emphasized that the Arctic is critical for the defence of North

America. Intercontinental missiles, hypersonic cruise missiles, and hypersonic glide vehicles coming from the mainland of Russia, North Korea and China—the United States' three main adversaries—would come through the Arctic.

Apart from missiles on the CF-18 fighter aircraft, there are no land-based air defence weapons deployed anywhere in Canada to intercept those weapons, or to protect our Arctic strategic defence assets. At the beginning of hostilities, would the aggressors not try to take out Canadian Forces Station Alert, the Arctic Over the Horizon and the Polar Over the Horizon radars, or key elements of the North Warning System such as its control centre in North Bay, Ont., to blind NORAD? What do we have at the moment to protect those strategic assets and obvious targets? Those are serious threats to the Arctic.

Our Royal Canadian Navy's capabilities in the Arctic Archipelago have improved significantly with the deployment of the new Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessels. Although very lightly armed, they are a physical presence on

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the Arctic Ocean with a capability to call on air power if need be. The planned addition of a helicopter and towed anti-submarine suite of sensors would greatly increase their deterrence capabilities. Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee recently stated that the AOPVs have "the capacity to install other weapons in a sort of *ad hoc* manner." I am not convinced that those additional weapon systems are actually in our inventories, or are ready to be deployed. The promise of new submarines with under-ice capability is good news given our current submarines' age and inability to go safely under ice. We also need to expedite the deployment of drones to perform surveillance under the ice.

What if a group of Russian Spetsnaz special forces were to take over CFS Alert and turn the antennas around? What could we do? During my days at the Airborne Regiment, Canada could deploy and sustain a force of over 1,000 paratroopers anywhere in the Arctic within days. The Regiment's Immediate Reaction Force could be deployed within 24 hours anywhere in Canada quickly followed by the rest of the

regiment in the following days. It was another political decision that deprived Canada of this capability. Now, the Army is too small, the availability of its major equipment is significantly limited, it lacks proper Arctic mobility and communications, and it does not train often or long enough in extreme cold conditions.

As the Arctic ice disappears, I am also concerned that the Chinese illegal fishing fleets will soon eventually reach into our Exclusive Economic Zone in the Western Arctic, and deplete our natural resources. They are reported to be fishing in Vietnam's EEZ under the protection of the Chinese Coast Guard. Their illegal harvesting of fish in the central part of the Arctic is also of concern when the fishing moratorium there ends in 2037.

In the past, we contributed significantly to global security. It has been said that Canada truly became a nation through our contribution during First World War. During the Second World War, some 700,000 Canadians served in uniform out of a population of 12 million. We had the fourth largest Navy. We did our part during

the Korean War. For decades, we contributed significantly to the United Nations peacekeeping missions in part to prevent a local conflict to degenerate into a war that would involve us directly. No longer. And although we did contribute importantly in Afghanistan, we are now known as a defence freeloader. We are criticized internationally for not pulling our weight.

One of the low-hanging fruits in terms of increasing our defence contribution to our allies is to join missile defence. Canada is the only NATO country not part of it. Allowing related systems on our soil will increase its collective effectiveness and raise the system's deterrence value.

Canada should consider bringing the Canadian Coast Guard back under the Department of National Defence, formally tasking it to actually guard and defend the coast along with its traditional functions.

We must also invest in defence infrastructure further north. Canadian Forces Alert needs to be reinforced. Resolute Bay, Nunavut, which is already hosting several federal facilities, is strategically located on the Northwest Passage and could be further developed as a security hub. It would support Canadian Forces and Coast Guard operations, the delivery of all federal services such as search-and-rescue and environmental response, and generate northern business opportunities. Two firms are working to establish a fibreoptic cable through the Arctic. Such a cable would further support the development of Resolute Bay. National Defence could then host our own and our allies' space assets for defence purposes such as earth observation download stations, air defence radar, communication satellites or missile defence assets.

It is clear that Canada, with our small population and relatively insignificant armed forces, cannot defend the second largest country in the world alone. We do this through alliances such as NORAD and NATO. But we cannot expect our allies to come to our help when we do not invest sufficiently in our own defence.

The Aug. 4, 2023, IPSO survey indicated that the majority of Canadians support increasing defence spending, especially when it comes to the protection of our Arctic (74 per cent). Even the Business Council of Canada has joined the call to spend more on defence. Politicians now have the popular support to do so. Will our politicians finally act to fulfill their primary responsibility, that to properly provide for the security of Canadians?

Pierre Leblanc is a retired colonel and a former commander of the Canadian Forces in the Arctic.

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