

Increased military presence in the North could provide much-needed infrastructure to the region: MPs, experts

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Northern MPs say they're open to increased military presence in the Arctic to protect the region's sovereignty against Russia, but stress the importance of community consultation.



A C-130 takes off from Canadian Forces Station Alert on Ellsmere Island, Nunavut, in 2019. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has spurred discussion about the state of Canada's military capacity, particularly in the North, where Russia is Canada's neighbour. *Photograph courtesy of Paul Green/The National Guard*

Northern MPs are open to the idea of an increased military presence in the Arctic, and say they could see the benefit of sinking military dollars into the remote region, insofar as it would have the side effect of improving infrastructure for locals.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine has some in Canada worried about the security of its northern border, given that Russia is Canada's neighbour over the North Pole, and has a history of testing North America's military response in the North.

“I think we need to start being more concerned,” said retired Canadian colonel Pierre Leblanc.

Leblanc said the situation between Canada and Russia is sort of like having a neighbour buy a big gun and start shooting practice in their backyard.

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“And now from time to time, he walks up to your property line, comes up to your fence with his gun,” he said. “That would cause a lot more concern than when he didn’t have a gun. You would be more concerned than the first time around when he didn’t have a gun.”

NDP MP Lori Idlout (Nunavut) said she’s heard some concerns from her constituents about the prospect of potential Russian aggression in the region, but stressed that any danger was “not imminent.”

Still, she acknowledged there are concerns that warrant some planning to make sure that the Arctic and its people are protected.

“The best way to go about keeping Arctic sovereignty is with Inuit, with Nunavummiut, the people who live in the Arctic and not just have decision-making unilaterally by the federal government,” she said. Idlout is the only Inuit MP in the House of Commons.

If the government is going to take steps to secure Arctic sovereignty and keep a militarized eye on Russia, then Idlout wants it to also invest in projects like the Canadian Rangers and community search and rescue teams—both of which are volunteer-run services in the North. The Canadian Rangers are a group of approximately 5,000 volunteers who provide a paramilitary presence in Canada’s North on behalf of the Canadian Armed Forces. The ranks are largely made up of Inuit, Métis, and other First Nations.

“Any kind of initiatives that might need to be implemented in the North has to include decision-makers from Northerners, because they know the environment, they know the land and they know what life is like in the Arctic,” she said.



NDP MP for Nunavut Lori Idlout wants Inuit and Nunnavumiut communities to be included in decision-making when it comes to military and infrastructure decisions in the North. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Defence Minister Anita Anand (Oakville, Ont.) does indeed have her eye on the North. She is planning a visit to the Northern territories, is meeting with her Nordic region counterparts, and is planning to inject some funds into modernizing NORAD—the North American body responsible for defending the continent’s aerospace. NORAD, a partnership between Canada and the U.S., was initially founded in 1957 to centralize the two countries’ defences against Soviet bombers.

Anand told CBC last week she was “bringing forward aggressive options” to Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland (University-Rosedale, Ont.) to increase Canada’s military spending as the finance minister prepares the upcoming federal budget—expected at the beginning of April.

Conservative MP Bob Zimmer (Prince George-Peace River-Northern Rockies, B.C.)—his party’s critic on the Northern file—said he perceives Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a signal for potential Russian aggression in the Arctic and that it should warrant increased military attention in the region.

He listed Canada’s military needs in the North, including an upgraded fighter fleet, participation in the ballistic missile defence system, and an upgraded North Warning System as part of NORAD.

“We know Russia has hypersonic missile capabilities that we need to be able to defend ourselves against,” he said.

Leblanc, who is now president of Arctic Security Consultants, said he sees a specific need for Canada to create a forward operating location for F-18s and a deep sea port in Resolute Bay, a hamlet in Nunavut. Currently, there is a base in Inuvik and a base in Iqaluit, but there is no deep sea port, and there are large swaths of land and about 1,900 kilometres between Inuvik and Iqaluit that go unprotected, he said.



Retired Colonel Pierre Leblanc wants Canada to instal a deep sea base and forward operating location for fighter jets at Resolute Bay, Nunavut. *Photograph courtesy of Twitter*

Idlout said she’s heard that proposal being made in communities as well.

“A port of that nature I think would be supported in the community because it could be used by the community as well,” she said.

Liberal MP Brendan Hanley (Yukon) said such a port would be an interesting proposal.

“I would just say that the three territories need to be part of that conversation, but it’s an example of the important discussions that we need to have and that Canada needs to take a lead on,” he said in an interview.

Gregor Sharp, a senior fellow at the Arctic Institute with a PhD international relations, said he doesn't see the threat of war in the Canadian Arctic as being even a remote possibility in the short-term.

“War is not going to happen in the Canadian Arctic,” he told *The Hill Times*. “If a war does break out in the Arctic, the primary theatre will be the European one. And even that is incredibly unlikely,” he said.

Leblanc suggested one of the causes for concern about Canada's Arctic sovereignty is that Putin is proving to be an irrational leader, citing Putin's heightening of his country's nuclear alert level, and carrying on with waging a war despite economic strangulation by most of the rest of the world.

“If he's going to be irrational in Ukraine, and at one point he wants to lash out, especially at the Americans ... one of the ways that he could lash out in a serious way is to use hypersonic cruise missiles that will more than likely come in from the North,” he said.

Sharp said he would challenge the assertion that Putin is irrational.

“He's acting rationally but within a different sphere of reference, the way he perceives the world is fundamentally different. I don't think that even he would come to the cost benefit analysis conclusion that attacking the North in the short term is worthwhile,” he said.

It comes down to feasibility, he said. It would be much easier for Russia to mount an Arctic attack somewhere like Norway, where it has military bases near Norway's border. Ice-free seas around that country would also make it an easier target than Canada, Sharp said.

“Do we need more attention, focused investment, in the North? Absolutely. But should that be entirely geared towards military concerns? I don't think so,” Sharp said.

That doesn't mean the idea that Canada's military should have a presence in the North should be thrown away, he added. A lot of what Canada's military could do in the North could have the dual purpose of benefiting communities, and that's not a side effect that should be dismissed.

“Having the capacity to operate successfully in the North is great for stopping illegal shipping or poaching, it's great for search and rescue, for mapping, and for climate information and all that that comes with these military operations, also benefits local communities.”



Senior fellow at the Arctic Institute Gregor Sharp said it's incredibly unlikely there will be any kind of war in Canada's arctic in the

Arctic sovereignty for whom?

Arctic sovereignty is a sticky term in the Canadian context of colonialism, Sharp and Hanley acknowledged.

“It’s one of those words that probably different people do have different interpretations of,” Hanley said.

“Arctic sovereignty means that the Arctic belongs to the peoples of the Arctic but at the same time, the Arctic is part of Canada and Canada’s commitment, and certainly the government’s commitment has been to advance the calls to action and reconciliation,” the Liberal MP added.

“Nunavummiut have been so unjustly treated because of Arctic sovereignty,” Idlout said. One instance Idlout cited was the forced relocation of 87 Inuit from Inukjuak in Northern Quebec and taken to Resolute Bay and Grise Fiord in the 1950s. Survivors of the relocation recount the Canadian government persuading them to move much further north, promising a better life there, only to come to the realization that Canada wanted civilians in the North so as to ensure its sovereignty at the height of the Cold War. The forced relocation resulted in death as the community were left to fend for themselves. They struggled to find food and survive in a vastly different environment than they were used to.

“There are so many atrocities in the name of Arctic sovereignty. Inuit, Nunavummiut seek reconciliation,” Idlout said. “There are so many infrastructure needs in Nunavut that Canada cannot ignore anymore. How they treated Inuit is not a distant past,” she said.

The trauma of colonialism on Inuit and Nunavummiut still impacts the well-being of those people today, she added, acknowledging there are “too many people” in the North who struggle with mental illness and intergenerational trauma.

“If Canada wants to do better for the Arctic, do better for Arctic sovereignty, investments and resources have to be made in the people of the Arctic,” Idlout said.

“Despite all that has happened, we still know our environment, we still know our wildlife, generation through generation, knowledge has been passed on so that we still are the ones that are experts in the environment. We have to be part of the decision making,” she said.

Hanley said it’s essential for Indigenous voices to define the future of the Arctic.

“The threats are not just military. It’s not just global security, it is as much about equipping ourselves for the climate change effects that we are facing—will be facing—for decades.”

What’s next for the Arctic Council?

Hanley said the one thing he appreciated about the Arctic Council is that different Indigenous groups do have a seat at that table.

At the beginning of March, in the wake of Russia’s attack on Ukraine, seven of the eight member countries of the Arctic Council withdrew from its activities in protest of the war. Canada, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and the United States announced they would pull back from the council, leaving Russia, the council’s chair, as the council’s sole member—for now.

Hanley said the Arctic Council “seems to be in a bit of a holding pattern.” What happens next remains to be seen, he said, but if the situation in Ukraine turns into a long-term situation with no resolution in sight, “then I think the Arctic Council will have to make some decisions about its ability to meet without Russia’s participation.”



Liberal MP for the Yukon Territory Brendan Hanley said the Arctic Council is currently in a ‘holding pattern,’ but if it comes to a point where the war in Ukraine is not resolving, Russia’s participation in the Arctic Council may have to be reconsidered. *Screenshot courtesy of ParlVu*

Idlout said she thought that hitting the pause button for now was the right move.

“I just hope that with a measured approach that we’ll be allowed to continue those conversations [with Arctic counterparts], even if it has to be through other means,” she said.

Zimmer said he was recently working to deepen relationships with Arctic counterparts by speaking with ambassadors to Canada from Nordic countries at the recent Arctic 360 conference in Toronto.

“Just to talk about how can we have a united front here, because now, one of those circumpolar countries is being aggressive and what do we do?”

Zimmer doesn't think Russia should be privy to the Arctic Council conversations anymore. "But all the more we should be talking, you know, much more than we were before even about what's next, and how can we be prepared for what's next as an allied group of countries?"

cnash@hilltimes.com

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