

The APF and ONSF

Evolving Visions of Canada's Arctic Maritime Defence

Adam Lajeunesse | February 2025

In December 2004, Minister of Global Affairs, Mélanie Joly, released *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* (AFP). She introduced the document with an obvious statement, yet one with profound implications: “For many years, Canada has aimed to manage the Arctic and northern regions cooperatively with other states as a zone of low tension that is free from military competition ... however, the guardrails that we have depended on to prevent and resolve conflict have weakened.”¹ Those guardrails were the political, legal, and cultural rules and norms that created what some political scientists called an ‘exceptional’ Arctic. This Arctic exceptionalism asserted that the region was peaceful and cooperative, divorced from the geopolitical conflicts that drove state behaviour elsewhere.² While never a formal Canadian position, this concept influenced most federal policy documents since the end of the Cold War – even if only as an ideal to strive for.

Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine strained that concept to the breaking point, while growing great power competition with China added a new and complex security dynamic. As the AFP was being developed in the summer and fall of 2024, joint Russia-Chinese naval exercises were taking place in the North Pacific and Bering Sea. That same season, the North Americans watched five Chinese research vessels deploy to the Arctic; meanwhile the US Coast Guard’s designated Arctic icebreaker – USCGC *Healy* – was down for engine repairs.

It was these dramatic shifts in adversaries’ intent and capability that led to Canada’s reconsideration of its Arctic defence and foreign policy. In May 2024, the Department of National Defence published its long-anticipated update to its 2016 defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE). The update, entitled *Our North Strong and Free* (ONSF), brought a new focus to the Arctic region and stood out, not just for its regional shift, but its change in tone. The focus of ONSF was great power conflict. It was built on the need to defend against the coercive power of adversaries and protect NATO’s northern and western flanks from military aggression. The Minister’s message in that document sums up the thrust of ONSF: “As the Arctic becomes more accessible to foreign actors, we need to ensure our military has the tools to assert our sovereignty and protect Canada’s interests.”³ Specifically, Canada’s Northwest Passage and the broader Arctic region, are now under threat from “competitors [who] are not waiting to take advantage – seeking access, transportation routes, natural resources, critical minerals, and energy sources through more frequent and regular presence and activity.”⁴

The AFP built on that framework and brought a more specific threat analysis, delving into the emerging threats presented by dual-purpose scientific research, hybrid warfare, and information operations. While the renewed Arctic security focus was holistic, there was an undeniable maritime flavour – a natural consequence of the Arctic’s maritime geography. The principal defence and security threats *to* the region⁵ have been identified as dual-purpose Chinese marine scientific research and surveillance and other hybrid activity, as well as cruise missile firing Russian attack submarines. Canada’s main response to these dangers is an expanded maritime presence: primarily the fleet of eight Navy and Coast Guard AOPV, as well as the CCG’s new icebreakers.

On paper, the expression of Canada’s requirements has not necessarily changed in its fundamentals. ONSF declares that “the most urgent and important task we face is asserting Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic” and that the government must “ensure our military has the tools to assert our sovereignty and protect Canada’s interests”⁶ This sovereignty language echoes past Canadian policies – conveying a general, if imprecise, desire to ‘control’ the Northwest Passage. Yet that push to enforce ‘sovereignty’ has taken a sharper tone. In many ways it echoes the 1987 White Paper, which balanced legal-political understandings of the concept with real concerns surrounding state-based threats. As was the case 37 years ago, Canada is now worried about submarines and hybrid state-vessels presenting a hostile presence in our waters.

The logic of defence has also forced a reconsideration of how Canada works to defend the region. As was the case during the Cold War, Canada has re-embraced Canada-US cooperation after two decades of preferring to operate unilaterally. Representing this “deeper collaboration”, the AFP makes repeated reference to the “North American Arctic.” It does so 13 times, when its predecessor, the *Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy*, never employed the term. The implication is clear: as a region, the defence of the North American Arctic has to be undertaken in partnership with the US; the Canadian Arctic simply cannot be defended separately from the whole. While the use of the term “North American” generated some nationalistic criticism, it is a logical extension of Canada’s new security focus. The AFP makes this explicit, stating: “we expect Canada–United States defence cooperation in the Arctic to continue to grow, as it is fundamental to both countries’ national security interests.”⁷

While gesturing to the Canadian-American partnership is standard in Canadian policy documents, real cooperation has been growing. In recent years, Operation *Nanook* has expanded to include more US participation – as well as that of other NATO members. Here, the AFP breaks with decades of Canadian foreign policy. Canada has long preferred to keep the Arctic outside of NATO operations, largely owing to political sensitivities on the question of transit rights. The AFP, however, calls for an increase in “information sharing with NATO on circumpolar threats.” Canada will also work to “improve interoperability and increase the collective understanding of the evolving security situation in the Arctic and enhance the Alliance’s cold- weather capabilities.”⁸

More than rhetoric, this is policy cover for what has already been developing. Since 2022, NATO allies have become a regular presence in CAF Arctic exercises. Naval and coast guard ships from Denmark and France have joined Operation *Nanook* (in addition to US Navy and Coast Guard partners), while the Portuguese Navy even deployed a submarine to Greenlandic waters in 2024.

Building on these commitments, Canada is forging ahead on under-ice detection systems, with \$1.4 billion set aside for “specialized maritime sensors to defend Canada from underwater threats on all 3 coasts.”⁹ This effort is a continuation of a long defence trend – stretching back to the 1970s. Common sense and historical patterns suggest that this effort will invariably require American support.¹⁰

New ships are also being brought online to implement Canadian policy. The RCN and CCG will soon have their full compliment of eight AOPV, which will provide increased presence and some armed capability in the region. Discussion of increasing the AOPV’s capabilities have also taken place within the RCN. This includes building capacity to operate Cyclone helicopters to “respond to the growing range and sophistication of maritime threats.”¹¹ Experiments are also being undertaken with containerized towed arrays. ONSF discusses “specialized maritime sensors” to enhance AOPV capabilities to track threats and respond to “a growing range and sophistication of underwater threats including vessel-launched missiles, underwater systems, ships and submarines.”¹² This is a departure from the use-case laid out in SSE, which saw the AOPV as tools to “enforce sovereignty”¹³ in “an Arctic where all Arctic states are seeking “productive collaboration.”¹⁴ While the “safety and security demands”¹⁵ highlighted in SSE remain valid, ONSF has clearly added a new defence mandate. In November 2024, this came through publicly when Vice Admiral Angus Topshee insisted that Canadian Armed Forces could stop Russia or China from sailing through the Northwest Passage without permission.¹⁶

While traditional state-based threats are now a clear focus, new grey zone threats have catapulted to the fore as well. From a maritime perspective, the clear threat highlighted in both ONSF and AFP is Chinese dual-purpose research activities. These quasi-civilian platforms are surveillance tools and vehicles for testing military technology in the Arctic waters. The potential dangers were brought home in February 2023 when a multi-sensor Chinese buoy was recovered from ‘Canadian waters.’¹⁷ While the precise purpose of that buoy remains classified it has generated fear of future Chinese military operations in the area. In comments to the *Globe and Mail*, retired lieutenant-general Michael Day said that this was likely an attempt to monitor US nuclear submarine traffic in the Arctic, and for mapping seabed and ice thickness (a precursor to submarine operations).

These fears manifested in ONSF, which warned that a “growing number of Chinese dual-purpose research vessels and surveillance platforms [are] collecting data about the Canadian North that is, by Chinese law, made available to China’s military.”¹⁸ The AFP echoes this concern, highlighting “China’s regular deployment of dual-use ... research vessels and surveillance platforms to collect data.”¹⁹ The AFP raises these concerns but also provides a healthy dose of nuance. While highlighting the dangers, it also reminds the reader that:

China, like all states, has rights and responsibilities related to its use of the world’s oceans that apply equally in the Arctic. For example, in accordance with UNCLOS, China can only conduct marine scientific research in the exclusive economic zone of another state with the consent of that state.²⁰

The value in explicitly reaffirming Canada’s recognition of Chinese rights under UNCLOS is to contrast Canada’s legitimate concerns with illegal maritime scientific research in the region. Chinese propaganda has for years pushed the notion that the Western Arctic states seek to unfairly

exclude it from the region in violation of international law. This exclusion narrative not only supports China’s broader metanarratives of Western Sinophobia and hypocrisy, but is also used by China to delegitimize Western naval operations in maritime areas illegally claimed by China, particularly the South China Sea and the Strait of Taiwan.

The AFP therefore offers some very constructive nuance by stating that “Canada will carefully review any such [research] requests related to its own exclusive economic zone and provide or withhold consent consistent with the provisions of the convention.” Canada is not seeking to exclude China from the Arctic, rather we are differentiating legitimate from malign behaviour – thus strengthening our own legal position on the matter and neutering Chinese attempts to propagandize.

With China now a major security concern, the AFP also breaks new ground by including the North Pacific into Canada’s visualization of the Arctic.²¹ That region is of critical importance to North American security, given that the Bering Strait is the only maritime access point to the Western Arctic. Historically, Canadian policy has paid little attention to the region, given the distance between the Arctic Archipelago and those Alaskan waters. Yet, as Canadian policy comes to view the security of the Arctic as a ‘North American’ issue, that region has naturally gained salience.

The shift from previous Canadian policy documents written before the invasion of Ukraine is profound. Great power conflict is now at the heart of Canada’s global outlook and the Arctic has been placed at the centre of its defence policy. Flowing from this threat perception is a renewed focus on collaboration with the US and NATO allies. This is a positive step and, in the future may pave the road for more formal operational partnerships and information sharing systems.

Adam Lajeunesse, PhD is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Public Policy and Governance program at St. Francis Xavier University. Dr. Lajeunesse is also the Arctic and Maritime Security Chair at the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government and the Director of the Canadian Maritime Security Network (CMSN).

Notes

¹ Canada, Global Affairs, “Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy,” (January 2025), 2 [hereafter AFP].

² Gail Osherenko and Oran R. Young, *The Age of the Arctic: Hot Conflicts and Cold Realities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.

³ Canada, Department of National Defence, “Our North Strong and Free,” (April 2024), V [hereafter ONSF].

⁴ ONSF, 4.

⁵ Threats *to* the Arctic refer to external threats impacting the Arctic region, which are distinct to *through* threats, which are threats travelling through the region. Lackenbauer “Threats Through, To, and In the Arctic: A Framework for Analysis,” NAADSN (March 2021).

⁶ ONSF, v, ix.

⁷ AFP, 8

⁸ AFP, 22

⁹ ONSF, IX.

¹⁰ On the history see: Adam Lajeunesse, “A Very Practical Requirement: Under-Ice Operations in the Canadian Arctic, 1960-1986.” *Cold War History* 13:4 (November, 2013).

¹¹ ONSF, 25.

¹² ONSF, 25

¹³ Canada, Department of National Defence, "Strong, Secure, Engaged" (2017), 35 [hereafter SSE].

¹⁴ SSE, 50.

¹⁵ SSE 51.

¹⁶ Chris Lambie, “Canada's top sailor says he's sure we could stop Russia or China from trespassing in Arctic”, the *National Post* (November 25, 2024).

¹⁷ Precisely where this was found remains classified.

¹⁸ ONSF, 4.

¹⁹ AFP, 8.

²⁰ AFP, 14

²¹ AFP, 8.