

US admiral claims Russia's intervention in Syria has implications for Arctic

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US Admiral Bill Gortney—the head of NORAD (the Canada-US North American Aerospace Defense Command) as well as the US Northern Command—is claiming that Russia's use of cruise missiles in Syria has major implications for US military strategy in the Arctic.

In a recent interview with the Canadian Press, Gortney voiced concern about a series of attacks on the Islamic State's capital in Raqqa, in which Russian ships fired missiles from the Caspian Sea at targets in Syria some 1500 kilometers away. "There was no tactical or operational requirements for any of those shots," said Gortney of last November's Russian cruise missile strikes. "They were telling us they have this capability and can employ it globally."

Although Gortney's remarks were aimed first and foremost at US policymakers, the fact that they were made to a Canadian news agency is no accident. The US and Canada are, both jointly and separately, seeking to expand their military capabilities in the Arctic—a region deemed to be of rapidly growing geopolitical significance because of the escalation of tensions between Russia and the North American imperialist powers, and because of its untapped resource wealth.

Gortney proceeded to warn of the danger of a cruise missile attack from the far north, raising the scenario of "rogue" forces seizing a ship in the Northwest Passage or, alternately, cruise missiles being fired from Russia. He stated that NORAD lacked advanced radar capacity in the region to track potential attacks, meaning that warning of a missile attack would be reduced.

Gortney's identification of an alleged Russian threat in the Arctic is part of a concerted campaign by US imperialism to portray Moscow as an aggressor that must be confronted by a global military buildup. In 2014, the Obama administration backed a fascist-led coup in Ukraine that brought to power a pro-western government, which adopted a confrontational course towards Russia and waged a civil war against its own population. Under US leadership, NATO seized on the Ukraine crisis to massively expand its military capabilities in

Eastern Europe and the Baltic so as to encircle and isolate Russia.

While Russia's intervention in Syria is a desperate attempt by the Kremlin to defend the interests of a criminal oligarchy by propping up its sole ally in the region, it is essentially of a defensive character. The United States has waged unending war in the Mideast for the past quarter century, throwing a series of countries into chaos and killing and displacing millions of people.

Washington's drive to overthrow Bashir al-Assad and establish a puppet regime in Damascus as a step towards consolidating its hegemony over the world's most important oil-producing region has created conditions in which a clash between Russian and US forces, or those of its allies, could quickly explode into a direct conflict between NATO and Moscow with the use of nuclear weapons.

The Arctic is yet another region where US imperialism is determined to counter Russian influence. The remarks of the NORAD commander were significant, since they revealed that US military strategists, along with their Canadian counterparts, are working on missile defence strategies, including improved radar surveillance.

Gortney's comments were made in the wake of the publication last month of a report from the influential Conference of (Canadian) Defence Associations that urged Canada's Liberal government to join the controversial US ballistic missile defence (BMD) shield. While portrayed in the media as purely defensive, the BMD program is, in fact, highly provocative and destabilizing. It is aimed at providing the US with the capacity to wage a "winnable" nuclear war against Russia or China.

Canada's Liberal government is about to embark on a full-scale review of Canada's military-defense policy, prompting a sustained campaign by the national-security establishment and corporate media for a major hike in military spending. The Canadian Press article that reported Gortney's remarks complained bitterly that the issue of the Arctic has "barely registered in Liberal policy statements."

Last month, Canada's military announced it will expand

its Arctic training base at Resolute Bay so that it can conduct operations all year round. The center, opened in 2013 by the previous Conservative government as part of its high-profile drive to assert Canadian sovereignty in the region, currently has the capacity to host 120 soldiers. “We need to build (on) what we’ve got right now in terms of capacity,” Lt.-Col. Luc St-Denis told the *National Post*. “January to April is a small season. There is potential for more than that, especially in the springtime and summertime.”

Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan has also vowed to expand the Canadian Rangers, a paramilitary unit which operates in the far north. Sajjan’s announcement came at the end of exercise Arctic Ram, two weeks of military operations by Canadian reserves at the Resolute Bay facility.

These moves are being justified by pointing to Russia’s expanding military presence in the Arctic. Last August, Russia held military exercises involving over 1,000 soldiers and 50 special vehicles in northern Siberia.

During the same month, the Kremlin submitted a claim to the United Nations asking for sovereign rights over 1.2 million square miles of the Arctic Ocean and sea-floor around the North Pole. The claim is part of a series of competing territorial claims by states bordering the Arctic Ocean, including Canada, the US, and Denmark.

The United States is the only country in this group not to have signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an instrument of international law which stipulates that the waters up to 200 nautical miles from the coast of a state constitute an exclusive economic zone, with provision for larger zones in the case of sea-shelves. The claim made by Russia and a competing claim filed by Denmark in late 2014 are based on the contention that an undersea ridge close to the North Pole is actually an extension of each country’s continental shelf.

US and NATO propaganda notwithstanding, Russia’s renewed focus on the Arctic, which has included the reopening of a number of Soviet-era bases above the Arctic Circle and the publication of a new naval strategy, pales in comparison to US imperialism’s drive to achieve global hegemony by building up its military forces on every continent, and in cyber and outer space. Last May and June, NATO held major air exercises above the Arctic Circle, involving 4,000 soldiers and 100 aircraft, with Russia the clear target.

The scramble for sovereignty over the Arctic, which represents another flashpoint in the growing war danger, is being driven by economic as well as geostrategic considerations. According to estimates by the US Geological Survey, approximately 30 percent of undiscovered natural gas reserves and 13 percent of oil reserves lie above the Arctic Circle. The region is also likely home to valuable

deposits of rare materials valued at between \$1.5 and \$2 trillion.

The growing importance of the Arctic was reflected in the report the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) recently drew up on the US pivot to Asia at the request of the US Congress. That report devoted 14 of its roughly 200 pages to discussing US strategy in the Arctic.

The CSIS report left no doubt that Russia, and even China, are viewed as US strategic rivals in the Arctic Ocean. It denounced Russia’s “aggressive behavior” and cautioned that a US Navy review of its Arctic operations carried out in early 2014 was obsolete. “(I)n light of renewed tensions with Russia,” declared the report, “these assessments are now out of date.”

The CSIS report urged the US Navy to deploy more submarines in the region and to carry out a “comprehensive review” of its Arctic operations. It noted a recommendation from the Department of Homeland Security that three heavy and three medium icebreakers are urgently required, since the US has only two such ships currently in operation and often has to rely on leased icebreakers from allies. However, it went on to complain that at the current pace of planning and construction the new icebreakers will only be deployed in the late 2020s.

CSIS also warned against a planned drawdown of US troops based in Alaska. Following publication of the report, Army Chief of Staff Mark Milley told a late February Senate Appropriations Committee hearing that he would not withdraw the 4-25 Infantry Brigade Combat Team from its Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska as planned. The original proposal, unveiled last July, had been to cut the combat team to battalion task force status, a move involving a reduction from 4,000 to 1,050 soldiers.

US concern over China’s role in the region is bound up with the opening of the Northern Sea Route (off Russia’s Arctic coast) and the Canadian Northwest Passage to regular sea traffic due to the effects of climate change. Beijing, observed the CSIS report, is now weighing the possibility of an alternative trade route from the Pacific, through the Arctic to the Atlantic Ocean, allowing it to bypass congested and contested sea lanes in the Indian Ocean. The report explicitly labelled the Bering Strait—which separates Alaska from Russia and the Arctic Ocean from the Pacific—as a potential “choke point.”



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