

Canadian imperialism using US-NATO war drive against Russia to expand military operations in the Arctic

Matthew Richter
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The Western powers' success in goading Putin to launch a reactionary war in Ukraine has intensified economic and geopolitical rivalries around the globe, including in the far north. The major powers view the Arctic, with its vast natural resources and trade routes opening up due to climate change, as a key battleground.

Canada has a direct rivalry with Russia in the region over competing territorial claims behind which lie key economic and geostrategic interests for both countries. It therefore comes as no surprise that Canadian imperialism, which is playing an extremely provocative role in pushing for a US-NATO attack on Russia that would trigger a third world war, is seizing on the conflict to expand its military presence in the Arctic.

Minister of National Defence Anita Anand is planning a trip to the Canadian Arctic to reinforce Ottawa's sovereignty and security claims in the region. In mid-March, her office informed the premiers of the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon that she will tour the territories to highlight the diplomatic and military issues in the region.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was provoked by the US-NATO imperialist powers' eastward march after the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, has provided the Canadian bourgeoisie with the perfect opportunity to proceed with long-planned military spending hikes. Anand made this clear in her speech at the 90th Ottawa Conference on Security and Defence on March 11. The conference was attended by high ranking Canadian military and NATO figures such as the Chief of Defence Staff General Wayne Eyre.

Anand stated, "The work is happening now to ensure that we are prepared for any eventuality, including in terms of Arctic sovereignty." Eyre bluntly remarked that NATO's northern flank "is a key area of concern" for the Canadian military. Since the conference, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has reiterated the call for all NATO members to spend a minimum of 2 percent of their GDP on defence. Canada currently spends 1.39 percent on defence-related spending, up from 1.01 percent in 2014. The Trudeau government pledged in 2017 to increase military spending by over 70 percent within a decade.

But this is only a down payment for the war-mongering Canadian ruling class. Last August, the Trudeau government signed an agreement with the Biden administration to modernize

the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), a Cold War-era binational continental defence structure established between Washington and Ottawa. A key goal of modernization for many senior military and foreign policy officials is to bring Canada into Washington's ballistic missile defence shield, which seeks to make a war fought with nuclear weapons "winnable."

Anand told the conference that Canada intends to announce a spending plan for the modernization of NORAD soon. The cost of modernizing NORAD's radar systems, which were last updated in the 1980s, is estimated to be more than \$11 billion. This equates to almost half of Canada's current annual defence budget. It is likely that the final cost will be much greater, as much of the technology is still in development. The proposed updates will include "over-the-horizon" and advanced maritime capabilities, which will be able to launch "first-strike" attacks on missile launching sites.

Several Arctic military exercises—all of which were scheduled long before the war in Ukraine—are either currently underway or have recently been concluded. Operation Noble Defender was announced by NORAD in a press release dated February 15, 2022. The operation ran from March 14 to 17 and involved hundreds of personnel from Canada and the US, dozens of Canadian CF-18 and American F-22 fighters, refuelling and other support aircraft. Ron Hubert, an associate professor of political science at the University of Calgary, told the CBC that the fact that "NORAD is going out of its way to make sure that you have an awareness of it, that that is being shared is obviously part of the signalling that we are giving to the Russians right now."

Another recent show of military force in the northern polar region was Arctic Edge. The US Northern Command announced the biennial exercise on February 8. Running from February 28 to March 17, the exercises included more than 1,000 US and Canadian personnel training for warfare in the Arctic.

The annual Canadian military Arctic exercise, Operation Nanook, is slated to take place this August in Cambridge Bay and Pond Inlet on the northern coast of Baffin Island. First undertaken in 2007 at the behest of the bellicose former right-wing Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper (who personally attended annually until the end of his term in office), the exercises are ultimately intended to project force in the Canadian Arctic to bolster Canada's sovereignty claims and take aim at Russia. While soldiers from Denmark and the US have participated over the past

decade, they have not done so as members of NATO.

While Canada enjoys a close military-strategic partnership with US imperialism stretching back over eight decades, there is a longstanding dispute between the two countries over the border in the Beaufort Sea. Ottawa and Washington also disagree over the status of the Northwest Passage sea route through the Arctic Ocean. Canada claims that it is part of its internal waters, while the US, in its interpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—which it has never ratified, claims that the passage is international.

The American contention for international waters would give its ships customs-free transit through the Arctic, something that would be economically beneficial for its commercial ships, and militarily advantageous for projecting force against Russia in the region and resupplying its northernmost airbase at Thule, Greenland. The Canadian government wants to control access to the straits and collect any dues to affirm their sovereignty claims over the region.

The Northwest Passage was ice-free for the first time in recorded history in 2007, opening a long inaccessible route to international trade that is also much shorter than current intercontinental shipping lanes. Twenty million tons of cargo passed through the straits in 2018, double the amount from the previous year. A recent study published in the journal *Nature Climate Change* suggests summers in the Arctic Ocean could be entirely ice-free by 2035. Manmade climate change is rapidly shrinking the area covered by arctic sea ice—about 2.8 percent per decade since NASA’s National Snow and Ice Data Center began keeping records in 1979. Sea ice coverage in the Arctic Ocean is down by about 40 percent since then. This dramatic loss of sea ice will have a domino effect on the acceleration of climate change.

The Canadian Arctic comprises 40 percent of the country’s total land mass. It is home to vast stores of untapped mineral and energy wealth. It is estimated that 13 percent of the world’s undiscovered oil reserves lie under the Arctic seabed. Major mining operations by publicly traded companies such as Agnico-Eagle operate in the territories, extracting precious metals such as gold, silver, copper and zinc.

The Mary River open pit iron ore mine, owned by Baffinland Iron Mines at the northernmost tip of Baffin Island in Nunavut, is another example of a strategic resource in the region. Canada was the 8th largest producer of the metal in 2020, ahead of the United States, which was ranked 9th, but falling behind China, 3rd and Russia, 5th.

The mine was the site of Inuit protests in February 2021 because of the impact it has had on the environment and hunting, one of their chief means of securing an existence in what is still largely an undeveloped region. Residents of this remote region are generally impoverished and struggle to afford food, which costs on average three times as much as in the southern parts of Canada.

Concerns surrounding the sale of Hope Bay gold mine in Nunavut last year shows the lengths to which the Canadian government will go to protect what it considers to be its “national security interests” in the Arctic. The mine, which lies on the Victoria Strait in Nunavut, was bought by Agnico-Eagle in January 2021. The Canadian government blocked its sale to the

Chinese state-owned Shandong Gold Mining Co. Ltd on “national security grounds” the previous month.

Over recent years, China has shown an interest in both the Northern Sea Route, which runs along the Russian Arctic coast, and the Northwest Passage, a fact that no doubt underlies Canada’s jealous guarding of its privileges in the region. As Jody Thomas, Trudeau’s national security adviser, put it in comments to the Ottawa Conference on Defence and Security in March 2021, “We should not underestimate at all that threat of resource exploitation in the Arctic by China in particular. China has a voracious appetite and will stop at nothing to feed itself, and the Arctic is one of the last domains and regions left and we have to understand it and exploit it more quickly than they can exploit it.”

Canada’s sovereignty claims to the Arctic Archipelago were first made under the so-called “Sector Principle,” first raised in the Canadian Senate by Senator Pascal Poirier in 1907. The basic premise of the claim was that since most of the islands had been discovered by British explorers, all of the islands to the North of Canada between 141 and 60 meridians of west longitude up to the North Pole were in the possession of Canada. This arbitrary claim was made at a time when the imperialist powers were preparing to bloodily redivide the world in World War I. Denmark, Norway and the US all made claims and sent explorers to the Arctic region. While Norway withdrew its claims, Canada’s ruling elite continues to have disputes with the US in the Beaufort Sea and with Denmark over Hans Island in the middle of the Nares Strait between Ellesmere Island and Greenland.

More recent attempts to bolster Canada’s Arctic sovereignty claims resulted in the forcible relocation of Inuit in parts of Baffin Island and Northern Quebec to barren, inhospitable islands of the north. The relocations were coercively enforced by the federal Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in 1953 and 1955. Government officials, the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches agreed upon this course of action the previous year as a means of populating the north. The Inuit were relocated to Grise Fiord on Ellesmere Island and Resolute on Cornwallis Island as a means of asserting the argument of “effective occupation” in relation to Canadian sovereignty claims. While an internal RCMP report from 2006 denies it, the Inuit claim that at least 20,000 Inuit sled dogs were killed during the 1950s and 1960s to force them to quit their traditional cultural practices and relocate to the new communities.



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