

Canada to reveal new Arctic policy by year's end amid deepening geopolitical tensions across the region

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Canada's Liberal government is expected to unveil a new Arctic policy by the end of the year. The document, following hot on the heels of the aggressive new Arctic strategy the United States adopted earlier this year, will aim to strengthen Canada's influence and military capabilities in the energy-rich and geostrategically critical region.

Although the details of the new policy are yet to be made public, all of the discussion surrounding it makes clear that the Arctic is increasingly viewed as a key front in a rapidly escalating third world war between the major powers. Economic, military, geostrategic, and energy policy considerations are propelling the imperialist powers to more aggressively pursue their interests at the expense of their great-power rivals and each other.

Canada's strategic reorientation is set to involve increased collaboration with other NATO powers—in particular the United States, and Sweden and Finland, both of which are newly admitted members of the organization.

Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly has made clear the policy update is being crafted to both respond to the deepening of the US-led NATO war against Russia, as well as to prevent China from strengthening its economic and military influence in the Arctic. In addition to closer military collaboration with allies and stepped up plans to expand Canada's military capabilities in the far north, the policy is expected to create an ambassador-at-large for Arctic affairs.

The announcement by Joly of Canada's intentions to dramatically revise its foreign policy approach in the Far North is the latest of a series of developments aimed at the swift militarization of the Arctic.

"We need to assess the fact that we are no longer in a 'High North, low tension' reality, which has been the foreign policy of Canada for a long time and of the Arctic Council," Joly stated in a June interview with Bloomberg. "This is about the security of North America. This is about the security also of our Arctic allies, including the transatlantic ones. And I think this is a pivotal decision for our own country that people in 20, 30 years will look back and say, 'That was the right decision to make'."

In the weeks following Joly's announcement, Canada, the United States, and Finland announced a trilateral agreement to build new fleets of icebreakers. In mid-November, ministers from all three governments met in Washington to sign a memorandum of understanding that outlines the practical terms for the implementation of the agreement, which aims to drastically ramp up icebreaker construction so that the US and Canada can catch up with Russia and avoid falling behind China in this domain.

Washington escalates its Arctic military presence

Canada's foreign policy revision comes on the heels of a revamped US Department of Defense (DoD) Arctic military strategy, as well as an updated military strategy for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Both military strategies outline plans to procure a vast array of new weapons to ensure that both US and Canadian imperialism have the means to wage war around the world. Central to both policy updates is the "modernization" of NORAD—the joint Canada-US aerospace and maritime defence command established at the height of the Cold War—and the further militarization of the Arctic.

The unveiling of the new US DoD Arctic military strategy has undoubtedly put additional pressure on Canadian imperialism to increase the pace of its Arctic militarization efforts. "This strategy," US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Arctic & Global Resilience Iris Ferguson said, "is very action oriented, which distinguishes it from previous Arctic Strategies."

The new DoD strategy adopts a "monitor-and-respond" approach to the Arctic, emboldened by the "deterrent value" of the DoD's ability to deploy its Joint Force globally at the time and place of its choosing. A central aspect of the new US strategy involves improving space-based capabilities critical to "build integrated deterrence" by expanding communication and surveillance techniques and more efficiently coordinating joint military operations—in particular, with Canadian forces in the North American Arctic.

Establishing continuous GPS and real-time communication and data processing is vital for advanced combat aircraft, which are expected to be increasingly deployed in the Arctic. Effectively, the DoD strategy calls for the Pentagon to be able to rapidly scramble aircraft and swiftly strike enemy targets while preventing the enemy from jamming their communications systems. Such infrastructure is critical to the NATO powers in the event that they carry out a "bloody nose" strike against Russian and Chinese targets.

Canada's former approach to Arctic foreign policy was based on "Arctic exceptionalism," which placed emphasis on calm relations and cooperation between the eight members of the Arctic Council, which includes Russia and what were until the recent northern expansion of NATO two "neutral" powers, Sweden and Finland. The new policy, whose crafting is currently underway, will adopt a directly bellicose approach toward Russia and China. At the same time, Canadian imperialism will attempt to cleave itself further still to its US ally, and deepen its engagement with the other five Arctic NATO members—Norway, Denmark (and Greenland), Iceland, Sweden and Finland.

This approach contains major difficulties for the Canadian bourgeoisie, not least incoming President Donald Trump's "America First" policies. Trump has already announced his intention to impose 25 percent tariffs on

imports from Canada and Mexico from “Day One,” underscoring that although Washington and Ottawa enjoy arguably the closest military-strategic partnership between two imperialist powers, they have competing and even rival interests in some areas. One example is the Northwest Passage, an important sea lane that Ottawa asserts is an internal Canadian waterway, a claim that Washington rejects and on occasion has demonstratively challenged.

Canadian imperialism has historically been reluctant to formalize a NATO presence in the Arctic, preferring to jointly manage what foreign policy circles call NATO’s “western” flank with the US under NORAD. But under conditions of NATO and Canada’s ongoing war against Russia, and the highly provocative entry of Sweden and Finland into the “Western alliance,” Ottawa has changed course. It now welcomes greater NATO involvement, a shift that was underscored by a joint 2022 visit by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to NORAD facilities in Cold Lake, Alberta and at Cambridge Bay, Nunavut.

The Arctic foreign policy update’s emphasis on increased collaboration with Finland represents a significant development in itself. A recent article published in *Foreign Policy*, an influential military and strategic policy journal based in Washington, provided an in-depth analysis of the strategic importance of Finland’s admission into the organization. “According to military experts and security officials,” the article notes, “Finland’s presence in NATO brings to the club a sort of Arctic Sparta, a highly trained force that will move the alliance’s center of gravity to the north.”

The article begins by explaining plans already underway to station US forces at Finnish bases, in particular at Ivalo and Sodankyla, both of which are located near to the country’s northern borders with Russia. It notes Ivalo’s proximity to “Russia’s powerful forces nearby, which include its crown jewels: the Northern Fleet and its nuclear submarines, held in and around the Russian port of Murmansk. The strategic harbor is so close that road signs point to it in Ivalo’s icy streets.” It is likely that a central portion of Canada’s revised Arctic foreign policy will involve following the lead of the US in enhancing military ties with Finland. Following Finland’s April 2023 accession to NATO, Washington signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement with Finland that gives the US military access to 15 Finnish military bases, as well as the right to station troops there for training and preposition war materiel.

Finland is one of few EU countries where military service is mandatory, with 285,000 soldiers ready to be armed and deployed. Some 900,000 of Finland’s total population of 5.5 million have had military training. In November 2023, Finland completely closed off its 800-mile border with Russia and is currently constructing a 124-mile fence along its eastern frontier.

Of particular importance to Finland’s Border Guard is the Jaeger Brigade, an elite Arctic military formation with a viciously reactionary history. The origin of its name dates back to a unit of Finnish nationalists created in Germany during World War I, when the Grand Duchy of Finland was still a part of the Russian Empire. At the outbreak of the Finnish Civil War in 1918, the Jaeger Brigade provided the White Army with its officers and NCOs, and played a decisive role in strangling the Finnish socialist revolution in its cradle.

“For Finland’s NATO allies, the Jaegers and the winter combat course that they organize have become the go-to guys when it comes to Arctic warfare, and Western countries—including the United States—have been sending their troops there to train for years. Since Finland’s accession to NATO, those requests have increased,” *Foreign Policy* notes.

A region of immense economic and geostrategic importance

The competition between the great powers in the Arctic is being exacerbated by the impact of climate change. The melting of sea ice both opens up Arctic sea lanes as viable trade routes, significantly reducing intercontinental transit times, and makes the exploitation of the region’s vast natural resources possible. This is the background to a series of bitter territorial disputes between states with claims in the Arctic, including Canada, the US, Russia, Denmark, and Norway.

The Arctic could therefore quickly emerge as a new northern front in the rapidly escalating third world war. Strengthened Arctic capabilities will present the opportunity for the US, Canada and its NATO allies to intensify its war on Russia, which erupted following the US-instigated Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Another front in the emerging global conflagration is the Middle East, with the imperialist powers unconditionally backing Israel’s genocidal onslaught on the Palestinians. They view this as a critical component of preparations for a region-wide war with Iran in order to consolidate US hegemony. Both of these wars are inextricably bound up, as even President Biden and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken have forthrightly stated, with the ever-intensifying economic, diplomatic and military pressure that Washington and its allies are placing on China in the Asia-Pacific.

The Arctic plays an increasingly important role in the imperialist powers’ drive to redivide the world for several reasons. First, it is a region rich in key raw materials, including oil and gas, and rare earths that are crucial for the rapidly expanding “clean energy” economy. Territorial claims to the Arctic Ocean floor are decisive in determining which power can lay claim to these natural resources. Secondly, the Northwest Passage on Canada’s northern coast and the Northern Sea Route along Russia’s Arctic coast are quickly becoming viable trade routes that would massively reduce freight transport times and costs between Europe and Asia. Thirdly, control over the Arctic and its approaches would offer crucial military advantages during a third world war. Missiles fired by North America’s imperialist powers against Russia and China could swiftly reach their targets by traversing the Arctic.

In order to achieve its predatory aims, Canadian imperialism aims to enlist the support of the Far North’s tiny indigenous elite. Joly announced that a substantial portion of the new Arctic foreign policy update will build on a 2019 framework aimed at further integrating the indigenous elite into the machinery of the state and military apparatus. She participated in a consultation session with Inuit leaders in Ottawa on November 8 to finalize the policy. “[W]e’re sending a message to the world that this is our territory, that these lands and waters are ours and those of Indigenous peoples,” Joly proclaimed.

The militarization drive in the Arctic will most certainly involve the continuation of the brutal oppression of the already marginalized population—the violation of land rights, the ramping up of the exploitation of indigenous workers, widespread environmental pollution, not to mention placing the entire population in the line of fire. The Liberal government’s “indigenous engagement” means the use of the region’s tiny elite, promoted through the cynical use of identity politics, as a battering ram against the general population, the vast majority of which will oppose the militarization of the region.

The only force within society capable of halting a global conflagration—which now poses an existential threat to the survival of humanity itself—is the international working class united around a genuine socialist program. The struggle against the militarization of the Arctic must be combined with opposition to imperialist war around the world, from the US-led war to subjugate Russia to the ongoing horrific imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza. This requires the building of an international anti-war movement led by the working class to fight imperialist aggression and all forms of oppression.



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