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CONTRIBUTORS

Opinion | Don't be complacent Canada, Russia's imperialism looms at our doorstep

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A Canadian soldier dismantles a drone as a team from the Canadian Navy test thermal imaging drone capabilities in Arctic environments, during Operation Nanook, the Canadian Armed Forces' annual Arctic training and sovereignty operation, in Inuvik, NWT, in February. Canada is making a significant push to boost its military strength in the Arctic, which accounts for 40 percent of its territory. Arctic ice is melting as a result of climate change, opening up the region and increasing the risk of confrontation with rivals like Russia over the area's natural resources, including minerals, oil and gas, as well as fresh water.

COLE BURSTON AFP via Getty Images

By **Marcus Kolga** Contributor

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Over the past decade, Russian President Vladimir Putin has made his intentions unmistakable. At a minimum, Russia aims to reassert colonial control over territories it “liberated” and then seized after the Second World War.

The terror unleashed on Ukraine — from ruined towns to deported children and daily bombardment — reveals the shape of Moscow's modern imperialism. Yet many still treat Putin's war as a distant European quarrel, echoing Neville Chamberlain's 1938 dismissal of Nazi aggression as “a quarrel in a faraway country, between people of whom we know nothing.”

It is not. The threat to Canada, our allies and our Arctic is clear and accelerating. Looking away will not make it fade. It invites more, and worse. It now looms at our own doorstep.

If the past decade has taught us anything, it is that Putin does not negotiate in good faith. His regime reads dialogue as weakness and exploits it. Betting on engagement with Moscow in the Arctic is wishful thinking that puts our sovereignty at risk.

The same was clear in the months before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when the Kremlin [denied](#) it had any such plan. Those who warned about Putin's aims were dismissed as [hysterical](#) "Russophobes." In the Arctic, by contrast, Moscow has openly spelled out its ambitions, pressed expansive territorial claims and matched words with rapid militarization across the region.

In 2021, Moscow broadened its UN submission on the Arctic continental shelf to include most of the Arctic Ocean seabed, right up to the outer limit of Canada's exclusive economic zone. University of Calgary professor Rob Huebert [observed](#) that Russia is "claiming the entire Arctic Ocean as their continental shelf ... claiming the entire Canadian and Danish continental shelf" as part of their own.

These claims mirror Russia's official [2035 Arctic Strategy](#), which envisions aggressive resource expansion that could collide with Canada's sovereign interests, maritime rights, and northern security.



In this photo taken from video and released by the Russian Defense Ministry Press Service on Jan. 26, 2022, the Russian navy's missile cruiser Marshal Ustinov sails off for an exercise in the Arctic.

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To back these claims, Russia has rebuilt and [expanded](#) its military presence in the Arctic.

It has reopened Soviet-era outposts, modernized airfields and radar and increased bomber, submarine and surface patrols. A growing fleet of nuclear icebreakers gives Moscow year-round reach in waters that guard Canada's approaches. Russia's offensive Arctic "superweapons" now include the Poseidon, a nuclear-powered undersea torpedo built to travel at high speeds under ice, evading detection, with the mission of devastating coastal cities and irradiating shorelines for generations.

Arctic watchdogs like Bellona [warn](#) that Moscow's Northern Sea Route is now serviced by a Russian shadow fleet of aging tankers that "operate outside normal maritime insurance and safety frameworks," often sail dark and evade oversight. Designed to evade sanctions, this fleet poses environmental risks in one of the world's most fragile seas.

French authorities recently [immobilized a Russian shadow fleet tanker](#) off Saint-Nazaire after President Emmanuel Macron tied it to “very serious wrongdoings.” Analysts also noted the ship’s presence off Denmark during recent drone incursions. This mix of lax regulation and deniable activity gives the Kremlin cover for hybrid operations, from surveillance to sabotage, which also threatens Canada.

Over the past year, the subsea fibre-optic link between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia has been [cut twice](#). Bell reports both incidents were deliberate and investigations are ongoing. It fits into the pattern of suspected sabotage in the [Baltic Sea](#) since 2022, where multiple data cables and energy lines have been damaged. Foreign involvement cannot be ruled out, including Russia.

Moscow and its proxies insist the Kremlin’s Arctic intentions are peaceful. Its record says otherwise. In June 2024, Russia’s ambassador to Canada [claimed](#) that Moscow “strongly advocates for the High North remaining peaceful and nonmilitarized,” even as Russia expanded bases, ran exercises and pressed maximal seabed claims.

By February 2025, the same envoy [accused](#) Canada, Sweden, and Finland of seeking confrontation. The Kremlin is recycling its Ukraine script: aggression masked as victimhood.

We are already seeing the Kremlin’s hybrid warfare tool kit in NATO’s North: aggressive patrols, drone overflights, GPS jamming and probing of undersea cables and choke points. Canada must treat this as a live security problem and answer with credible capacity, resilient infrastructure, and tight interoperability with allies.

Putin has demonstrated raw contempt for sovereignty and human life. Canada’s Arctic is vulnerable and a prize in the Kremlin’s imperial ambitions. The signals from Moscow point to a growing flashpoint.

Like our Arctic allies Finland and Sweden, we must prepare now. Canada’s best defence lies in demonstrating credible strength and unwavering political will and determination, both at home and alongside our allies.

Opinion articles are based on the author’s interpretations and judgments of facts, data and events. [More details](#)

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