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by Emily Grant

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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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In the 1950s, the Canadian government forcibly relocated 16 Inuit families through its High Arctic relocation program. The stated purpose of the relocation was to move Inuit from "overpopulated, depressed areas" where they were dependent on government relief payments to new communities where they could partake in a "native way of life" through subsistence hunting.[1] However, the relocation of Inuit from Inukjuak, Quebec and Pond Inlet, Nunavut to the much less hospitable environs of Grise Fiord and Resolute in the High Arctic did little to improve their living conditions, and several relocatees reported nearly starving to death. Many who were affected by the plan have argued that the relocations were calculated to bolster Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic amid concerns about growing U.S. defence capabilities in the region and the tendency of Greenlanders to hunt in the Canadian Arctic Islands Game Preserve. In 2010, then-Indian and Northern Affairs minister John Duncan issued a formal apology for the false promises the government made during the High Arctic relocation program.[2] This case illustrates what can happen when concerns about sovereignty override concerns about people.

These days, policy-makers frequently invoke threats to Canada's Arctic sovereignty to marshal public support for increased defence spending and industrial development in the region. For instance, then-National Defence minister Anita Anand said, "We have to make sure that we continue to do what is necessary to protect our Arctic, to maintain our Arctic sovereignty," in response to the shooting down of a Chinese spy balloon over the Yukon in February 2023.[3] Similarly, Sean Boyd, executive chair of the board of Agnico Eagle Mines Ltd., wrote in the *Globe and Mail* in June that a homegrown mining industry in the North would "solidify Canada's claim to sovereignty through an increased business presence."[4] As one journalist quipped last year, "nothing focuses public attention quite like an existential threat."[5] Largely as a result of such rhetoric, there is a widespread perception that Canada faces an existential threat as foreign powers, chiefly Russia and China, vie to erode Canada's Arctic sovereignty.

However, the reality is that these threats are neither imminent nor inevitable. In a recent report from the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence, Canada's Chief of the Defence Staff Gen. Wayne Eyre said there is "no real threat today to [Canada's] territorial sovereignty; nor do I see one in the near future."[6] Similarly, Kevin Hamilton, Global Affairs Canada's director general of international security policy, described Canada's Arctic sovereignty as "well-established" and emphasized that "every day, through a wide range of activities,

[1] Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, "The High Arctic Relocation," Library and Archives Canada, 1994, https://data2.archives.ca/rcap/pdf/rcap-458.pdf.
[2] William Tagoona, "Inuit Get Federal Apology for Forced Relocation," CBC, August 18, 2010, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/inuit-get-federal-apology-for-forced-relocation-1.897468.
[3] Jane Syed, "Spy Balloons, Buoys Highlight Need to Protect Canada's Arctic Sovereignty, Says Defence Minister," *North Shore News*, February 22, 2023, https://www.nsnews.com/local-news/spy-balloons-buoys-highlight-need-to-protect-canadas-arctic-sovereignty-says-defence-minister-6596620.
[4] Sean Boyd, "Mining the Arctic's Critical Minerals is Vital for Canada's Sovereignty, Northern Prosperity," *Globe and Mail*, June 12, 2023, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/commentary/article-canada-arctic-critical-minerals/.
[5] Bartley Kives, "By Spending More on Defence, the True North Concedes It Must Be Stronger If It Wants to Stay Free," CBC, April 10, 2022, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/canda-winnipeg-defence-budget-analysis-1.6413824.
[6] House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence, "A Secure and Sovereign Arctic," 2023, https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/NDDN/Reports/RP12342748/nddnrp03/nddnrp03-e.pdf.

governments, indigenous peoples and local communities all exercise Canada's enduring sovereignty over our Arctic lands and waters."

All of this is not to say that Canada should not invest resources in Arctic defence and development. However, such investments must take account of the current threat landscape and the needs of Arctic peoples. Moreover, Canada must avoid repeating past mistakes by ensuring that local people are given substantial decision-making authority, which encompasses and transcends the right to consultation.

Sovereignty or Security?

Technically speaking, there are currently no threats to Canada's Arctic sovereignty. This argument has been convincingly made by Arctic security scholars Andrea Charron and James Fergusson, who break the concept of sovereignty into its *de jure* and *de facto* components.[7] According to them, there are no *de jure* threats because Canada does not in fact have *de jure* sovereignty over disputed areas such as the Northwest Passage and the Beaufort Sea, so its sovereignty in these cases cannot be threatened. These are jurisdictional issues that must be resolved in courtrooms or through negotiations between the disputing parties. There are also no *de facto* threats to Canada's Arctic sovereignty because the possibility of foreign invasion or annexation of Arctic territory over which Canada has *de jure* sovereignty is so remote. Moreover, Charron and Fergusson contend that efforts to deter such invasion or annexation in the future concern homeland defence, not sovereignty *per se*.

In light of this analysis, it may be more correct to refer to threats to Canada's Arctic security rather than its sovereignty. There are a couple of different ways to understand security.[8] The traditional understanding, which was popular during the Cold War, tends to focus on military defence, especially the protection of national borders and the assertion of state sovereignty over Arctic land and water. However, an alternative understanding of security that emphasizes economic, social, cultural and environmental concerns has become popular in recent years because it reflects new and distinct types of threats, such as climate change and pandemics.

This alternative understanding of security was reflected in the federal government's 2019 Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, which acknowledged that in the Arctic, "safety, security and defence are essential prerequisites for healthy communities, strong economies, and a sustainable environment."[9] From this perspective, defence is only one pillar of Arctic security. It works in conjunction with the economic, social, cultural and environmental pillars to protect Canadians

[7] Andrea Charron and James Fergusson, "Arctic Sovereignty: Preoccupation vs. Homeland Governance and Defence," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, September 2018, https://www.cgai.ca/arctic_sovereignty_preoccupation_vs_homeland_governance_and_defence.
[8] Whitney Lackenbauer, "Re-thinking Sovereignty and Security in the Arctic," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, March 2016, https://www.cgai.ca/opedmarch232016c.
[9] Government of Canada, "Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: Safety, Security, and Defence Chapter," 2019, https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1562939617400/1562939658000.

from all sorts of threats, including poverty, hunger, disease and natural disasters, as well as more remote threats from foreign adversaries.

This holistic understanding of security is more consistent with the people-first Arctic security policy detailed below. However, this paper will continue to refer to both sovereignty and security as each term is used in popular discourse.

The Threat Landscape

According to most observers, the most significant threats to Canada's Arctic sovereignty come from two sources: Russia and China. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 spooked the international community, but it is not obvious that alarm about Russian aggression should extend to the Arctic. While analysts have pointed to increased Russian military buildup and activities in the region as reasons for Canada to bolster its Arctic defences, it is important to place the threat posed by Russia within its broader context.

While it is true that Russia has been improving its military capabilities in the Arctic in recent years,[10] these activities do not necessarily indicate that Russia intends to act offensively against other Arctic states. In fact, it is more likely that Russia is responding to a tense geopolitical environment in which it will soon become the only Arctic state that is not a NATO member. Thus, Russia's activities in the Arctic may be interpreted as a sign of insecurity rather than strength.

Russia has legitimate reasons to be concerned about the security of its Arctic territories. About two million Russians live in the region, which accounts for roughly 20 per cent of Russia's GDP, and the country's primary nuclear deterrent is stationed there.[11] While Russia certainly has an interest in being able to adequately defend its own territory, it has little strategic interest in invading the Canadian Arctic. With half the Arctic already within its borders, Russia hardly needs more Arctic to defend, and it knows that such an invasion would almost certainly prompt an overwhelming response from NATO. In light of these realities, the sense of alarm generated by allusions to a looming Russian threat has little basis in reality.

What about the threat from China? In 2018, China declared itself a "near Arctic state" based on its involvement in scientific research, resource exploration and shipping activities in the Arctic. China argued that the region was "gaining global significance" and that changes in the Arctic, whether the result of economic development or climate change, had "a vital bearing on the interests of States outside the region and the interests of the international community as a whole, as well as on the survival, the development, and the shared future for mankind."[12]

[10] Jeff Collins, "On the Arctic Watch: Why We Need to Protect Canada's Sovereignty and Security in the Far North: Jeff Collins for Inside Policy," Macdonald-Laurier Institute, January 17, 2022, https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/what-we-need-vs-what-we-have-assessing-canadas-defence-capabilities-in-the-arctic-jeff-collins-for-inside-policy/.
[11] House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence, 2023.
[12] Petra Dolata, "A Global Arctic? Chinese Aspirations in the North," *The Global Exchange* 16(3): 25–27, 2018, https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cdfai/pages/97/attachments/original/1541097817/The_Global_Exchange_-_Fall_2018.pdf?1541097817.

While China would balk at such statements made about areas it considers to be its own sovereign territory, this argument is not unprecedented. In 2008, the European Union called for the development of an EU Arctic policy, citing the potential consequences of environmental changes in the Arctic for international stability and European security interests. For both China and the EU, the increasing accessibility of energy and mineral resources due to melting ice and thawing permafrost is a major reason for conceptualizing the Arctic as a region with global significance.

Current evidence suggests that any threat to Canada's Arctic sovereignty from China is likely to be political and economic rather than military. So far, China has sought to increase its involvement in the Arctic through multilateral governance structures such as the Arctic Council and through bilateral projects such as the Yamal LNG project in Russia, an LNG pipeline in Alaska, the Kouvola-Xi'an railroad connecting Finland and China and infrastructure and mining investments in Iceland and Greenland. These projects are part of China's Polar Silk Road initiative, Beijing's attempt to gain influence in the Arctic by funding economic development projects there. While these investments are occurring on a much smaller scale than China's investments in Africa or Latin America, no other outside player is investing so much money in the Arctic, which is a region characterized by high costs and slow payoffs. In particular, China is eager to participate in the race for rare earth minerals such as cobalt, lithium and nickel, which are essential for electric battery production and may be found in great quantities in the Arctic.

Regarding shipping, experts predict that Chinese shipping companies will prefer to use the Northern Sea Route along the Russian coast rather than the Northwest Passage through the Canadian Arctic, given the former's existing port facilities and the proximity between Russia and China, both geographic and ideological.[13] Thus, any threat to Canada in this respect is minimal.

A third set of threats comes from ostensibly friendly states who challenge Canada's Arctic sovereignty claims. For instance, Canada and the U.S. have long disagreed about the status of the Northwest Passage, with Canada claiming it as its historic internal waters and the U.S. calling it an international strait. In 1988, the two countries agreed to disagree on the matter. Through the Arctic Co-operation Agreement reached by then-prime minister Brian Mulroney and then-president Ronald Reagan, the U.S. was allowed to designate the Northwest Passage as an international waterway while Canada was allowed to call it a part of its sovereign territory. Moreover, the U.S. would seek Canada's permission to transit through the passage, though there was little Canada could do if it failed to seek permission.

This was not a perfect solution, and decades later, the issue is still contentious. In 2010, when the Harper government made the Arctic shipping reporting system mandatory, the U.S. issued a diplomatic protest, stating that Canada could not unilaterally assert control over the passage.[14] In 2019, then-U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo said Canada's claim to the Northwest Passage was "illegitimate," demonstrating the Trump administration's contempt for U.S. allies, including

[13] Collins, "On the Arctic Watch ..."
[14] Rob Huebert, "Protecting Canadian Arctic Sovereignty From Donald Trump," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, November 2018, https://www.cgai.ca/protecting_canadian_arctic_sovereignty_from_donald_trump.

Canada.[15] While the Biden administration has been careful to avoid making such controversial statements, the issue remains unsettled.

Some experts have made a compelling case that it is in America's interest to support Canada's claims to the Northwest Passage. Former Canadian diplomat Robert Hage suggests that the U.S. "should ask itself whether it wants an unregulated international strait across the top of North America or one controlled by a friend and ally."[16] He describes Canada as a responsible steward who "can safeguard the fragile Arctic environment, take measures against security and terrorist threats, overuse and smuggling, establish ports and search and rescue facilities, and work with the Inuit to ensure their rights over the land and sea are respected." According to him, "no other nation can do so."

Similarly, historian David Bercuson contends that "at the end of the day, Canada will manage the passage because all the waters leading to and from it are Canadian."[17] For this reason, he argues that "Canada must be responsible for the passage's maintenance, for search and rescue, and for providing navigational … information … to any ship that proceeds there." Thus, Canadian management of the Northwest Passage seems like a safer bet for the U.S. than leaving it up to the international powers that be, assuming Canada can muster the resources to do so effectively.

While these more conventional threats tend to get the most attention, there are also a whole host of unconventional threats, such as cyberattacks, intellectual property theft, non-traditional espionage, the spread of propaganda and election meddling, that challenge the sovereignty of virtually every nation on Earth.[18] The traditional defence establishment has a role to play in mitigating these threats, but so too do strong democratic institutions, public-private partnerships and government regulations.

Given the current threat landscape, alarmist rhetoric about the possibility of Russian invasion, Chinese economic takeover or anarchy in the Northwest Passage begins to seem less prescient.

The Way Forward

Approximately 150,000 people live in the Canadian Arctic, more than half of whom are Indigenous. Inuit live in 53 communities across Inuit Nunangat, which is the Inuit homeland in northern Canada, and Athabaskan and Gwich'in peoples live primarily in the Northwest Territories and Yukon.[19] Although they make up less than one per cent of Canada's total population, these people are the ones who are on the ground managing nearly 40 per cent of

[15] Mike Blanchfield, "U.S. Says Canadian Claim to Northwest Passage is 'Illegitimate,'" *Globe and Mail*, May 7, 2019, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-us-warns-china-russia-against-aggression-in-the-arctic-region/.
[16] Robert Hage, "Rights of Passage: It's Time the U.S. Recognizes Canada's Arctic Claim," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, September 2018, https://www.cgai.ca/rights_of_passage_its_time_the_us_recognizes_canadas_arctic_claim.
[17] David J. Bercuson, "Canada's Sovereignty: The Threats of a New Era," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, November 2018, https://www.cgai.ca/canadas_sovereignty_the_threats_of_a_new_era.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Arctic Council, "Canada." Accessed on July 13, 2023, https://arctic-council.org/about/states/canada/.

Canada's land mass. These people have a vested interest in the effective governance of their home and supporting them is the best way to safeguard Canada's Arctic sovereignty and security.

Canada's sovereignty is not the only one at stake in the Arctic. Indigenous peoples also have legitimate sovereignty claims, although centuries of settler-colonial practices have obscured this reality. In Canada, Indigenous sovereignty claims are often interpreted as rights to self-determination, defined so as not to conflict with the overarching sovereignty of the Canadian state. Nevertheless, Indigenous representative bodies, such as the Inuit Circumpolar Council, assert that they are sovereign, and this assertion encompasses and transcends the principle of self-determination.[20] [21]

Although the distinction between self-determination and sovereignty in this case is not always clear, it is generally accepted that Indigenous peoples have particular rights as the first inhabitants of the territories now claimed by Canada and given their ongoing relationships to these lands (and waters). In the Arctic, these rights manifest in many ways, often through consultations with Indigenous peoples by public and private sector entities looking to develop policies, conduct research or access natural resources. Typically, these entities want something, and they consult with Indigenous peoples to gain their approval. We should reverse this dynamic and ask Indigenous peoples what they want, let the needs of their communities govern decision-making and find ways of meeting those needs. Sometimes, this will look like economic development, with a role for the private sector and opportunities for profit-seekers. Other times, it will be public investment in things that can benefit all Canadians, such as environmental conservation and national defence. Still other times, it will be funding for initiatives that primarily benefit local people, because they, too, deserve a good quality of life and the opportunity to determine for themselves what that means.

The people-first Arctic security strategy this paper envisions has two components: near-term investments to improve quality of life for people living in the Arctic and long-term defence planning to protect the security of all Canadians, reassure allies and deter adversaries. There is some overlap between these components, such as dual-use infrastructure that can improve living standards in the near term and enhance defence capabilities in the long term. Both components must be governed by local needs, as expressed by local people, rather than abstract notions of national interest determined elsewhere.

Near-term Investments in Local Priorities

In the near term, infrastructure investments in the Arctic must address local priorities, including improvements to health-care facilities and schools, expansion of telecommunications and internet services, maintenance of roads and airports and greater access to affordable energy, food and other essential goods. Good stewardship of the environment is another priority. This includes

[20] Inuit of Inuit Nunaat, "Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Arctic Sovereignty," Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2009, https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/icc-international/circumpolar-inuit-declaration-on-arctic-sovereignty/.
[21] Emily Grant, "States Are Not the Only Sovereigns," M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 2023, https://knowledge.uchicago.edu/record/5988.

addressing climate change through country-wide measures such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as well as helping Arctic communities adapt to the environmental changes already taking place.

As the climate warms, Arctic ice is receding, which will open the region to more shipping and industrial activities, especially in and around the Northwest Passage. To the extent that industrial development of the region is permitted, efforts must be made to train and employ local people, who can bring key knowledge and skills to these operations. Regarding shipping, Canada should move forward with its plan to identify and enforce low-impact shipping corridors through which ships can travel while minimizing their impact on local ecosystems.[22] Canada should also implement pollution mitigation and response measures to provide efficient cleanup if accidents occur. Additionally, since the combination of changing environmental conditions and increased traffic through the Arctic will make the region more perilous for locals and visitors alike, the Canadian Coast Guard must receive the resources necessary to expand its search-and-rescue capacity.

Effective management of the Canadian Arctic and especially the Northwest Passage would address local safety and environmental concerns and demonstrate the value of Canadian stewardship to foreign actors, thereby discouraging challenges to Canada's sovereignty while encouraging peaceful economic activities and investment in the region. Canada's management of the Northwest Passage should involve investments in infrastructure that encourages ships to use the low-impact shipping corridors in preference to alternative routes, as well as mechanisms to monitor who is entering and leaving Canadian territory and to ensure that they comply with appropriate environmental and safety regulations. All of this should be done in consultation with Indigenous and other local people, who would be the first to feel the ill effects of poor management of the Northwest Passage, whether by Canada or another international entity.

Long-term Investments in National Defence

As one Inuit leader put it, Arctic communities are on the "front lines" as the Arctic is the "backdoor into Canada."[23] In some cases, Indigenous communities have been the ones to alert the government to the presence of foreigners, often research vessels. While the Canadian government has committed to investments in new patrol vessels and modernizing NORAD, these investments will not have immediate effects. Thus, Canada must do what it can to strengthen Arctic communities now while also investing in longer-term projects to improve future defence preparedness.

Dual-use infrastructure, which can be used for both military and civilian purposes, is an important part of this strategy. The House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence

[22] Government of Canada, "Northern Low-Impact Shipping Corridors," 2022, https://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/about-notre-sujet/engagement/2021/shipping-corridors-navigation-eng.html.
[23] Christian Paas-Lang, "Canada Needs a 'More Consistent' Presence in North to Bolster Security, Inuit Leader Says," CBC, May 21, 2022, https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thehouse/duane-smith-canada-presence-arctic-defence-1.6462260.

acknowledged in its 2023 report that "the infrastructure deficit in Canada's North is a significant barrier … to defence and security, to economic development, and to improving the quality of life in northern and Indigenous communities." It highlighted opportunities for defence-related investments to support the development of dual-use infrastructure, such as "affordable energy supplies, consistent telecommunications, and appropriate transportation facilities" that can benefit local communities as well as the Canadian Armed Forces.

Even though there are no imminent threats, it is prudent for Canada to act now to improve its Arctic defences given the lengthy timelines for defence procurement and the difficulty of predicting an adversary's intentions far into the future. These improvements should include upgrading intelligence platforms, replacing aging aircraft and ships, investing in anti-submarine warfare capabilities and streamlining logistics to minimize emergency response times.[24] The costs for these longer-term projects can be spread over many years, but it is important to start now to avoid a massive defence deficit in the future.

Since effective defence relies on communication as well as capabilities, Canada must continue to communicate with other Arctic states bilaterally and through multilateral forums such as the Arctic Council. While Russia has recently been ostracized from the Arctic Council in response to its aggression in Ukraine, Charron predicts that the Arctic Council will play a role in eventually normalizing relations with Russia. In particular, confidence-building measures among the Arctic states, such as informing each other about planned military exercises, will be necessary. Russia will likely have a heightened perception of military threats in the region due to the enhanced co-operation among the other Arctic states that will develop during Russia's absence from multilateral forums.[25] Thus, dialogue with Russia should be a key part of Canada's Arctic security policy.

Another important aspect of this policy will be dialogue with China. Although China's "near Arctic" status does not grant it any legal rights, it is unlikely that its interest in the Arctic will go away any time soon. While Canada should be wary of making concessions to China in this hotly contested area, it should endeavour to find avenues for co-operation, such as research partnerships or joint business ventures, through which all parties can benefit and Chinese activities can be monitored by Canadian authorities.

Canada should also work closely with its international partners, especially the U.S. through NORAD, to monitor the Arctic and deter foreign aggression. While Canada has historically been concerned about American encroachments on Canadian sovereignty, the NORAD military partnership has been tremendously successful, and though disputed areas such as the Beaufort Sea and the Northwest Passage remain points of contention, these should not hamper future co-operation. Instead, Canada should strive to demonstrate the benefit of Canadian management of

[24] David Perry, "Canada's Sovereignty in the Arctic," Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, October 24, 2018, https://www.cgai.ca/canadas_sovereignty_in_the_arctic.
[25] House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence, 2023.

these areas, or to the extent that legal clarity is judged to be preferable to jurisdictional ambiguity, formally pursue its claims on the basis of international law.

Therefore, to ensure that the Arctic remains a region of peace, co-operation and security in the decades to come, Canada must invest in northern communities while continuing to upgrade its defence capabilities and communicate with allies and adversaries alike. Put simply, people, not abstract notions of national interest, should be the overriding concern of policies designed to protect Canada's Arctic sovereignty. In this way, Canada can establish itself as an effective leader capable of managing the region's economic and environmental assets, in addition to defending the Arctic through traditional means.

About the Author

Emily Grant *graduated from the University of Chicago in 2023 with a B.A. in Political Science and a M.A. in International Relations. Her thesis deals with the way conventional International Relations scholarship constructs the concept of sovereignty, arguing that its state-centric nature perpetuates the logic of colonialism by excluding Indigenous sovereigns from full participation. Originally from Calgary, Alberta, Emily is a member of the Métis Nation. She now lives in Washington, DC, where she works in the private sector.*

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