

Securing the Northwest Passage: Integrating Climate Change into Canada's National Security Policy

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Issue

The Canadian government is ill-equipped to mitigate the threats that climate change presents to Canada's core national security interests in the Northwest Passage (NWP), with implications for surveillance and crisis management, Canada's position as a leader in Arctic governance and Indigenous rights and sovereignty.

Background

Climate Change as a Security Threat Multiplier

Climate change is an emerging security threat that is excluded from the Government of Canada's (2004) National Security Policy. As a threat multiplier that challenges our core national security interests, climate change is exposing new, unclaimed areas that can act as sites of conflict, resource extraction and threats to sovereignty of Indigenous populations and Arctic allies (Bronskill 2023; Fu and Jiang 2020). Sea ice melt is the most prevalent threat that climate change poses to the Arctic; the Arctic is warming three times faster than the global average. Arctic sea ice extent has declined by more than 25 percent since the 1970s and extensive sea-ice free periods are projected by mid-century (National Aeronautics and Space Administration 2022). This means that Canada's northern internal waters are becoming increasingly accessible. Specifically, as ice melts in the NWP, there will be increased access to large pools of oil

and critical minerals that other Arctic states, including the United States, the Federation of Russia, the Kingdom of Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Norway, may want to claim. Sea ice melt also makes Arctic waters more accessible, creating opportunities and challenges through trade and tourism-related traffic, increasing the risk of spills and pollution in local Indigenous communities.

Focusing on the NWP as a way of managing the implications of climate change on Canadian security policy allows for feasible, spatially bound recommendations for action on this emerging threat. Although the immediate security threat is low, now is a prime opportunity for Canada to act proactively and secure its sovereignty over the NWP. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Mandate Letter advises Global Affairs Canada (GAC) to "move faster and go further on security measures" (Government of Canada 2021). Securing the NWP is a proactive measure for climate-proofing Canada's security strategies and offers a tangible first step for climate securitization across the country. To minimize the threat of climate change to national security in the NWP, important areas for GAC to consider are surveillance and crisis management, building confidence in Canada's leadership in the Arctic, and Indigenous sovereignty and security.

The current political context also provides an opportunity for GAC to proactively work toward Goals 6 and 7 of Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (Government of Canada 2019), which was established

in 2019. Goal 6 aims to ensure that “the rules-based international order in the Arctic responds effectively to new challenges and opportunities” and “bolster Canadian leadership in multilateral forums where polar issues are discussed and decided upon.” Goal 7 outlines ways to “strengthen Canada’s cooperation and collaboration with domestic and international partners on safety, security and defense issues” to ensure that “the Canadian Arctic and North and its people are safe, secure, and well-defended” (ibid.).

Arctic Surveillance and Crisis Management

Currently, surveillance and crisis response in the Canadian Arctic consists of three RADARSAT satellites and a fleet of vessels and aircrafts from the Canadian Coast Guard and Canadian Armed Forces, many of which are expected to cease operation before they can be replaced (Canadian Space Agency n.d.). The RADARSAT satellites monitor as far as 1,200 nautical miles from Canadian shores, but cannot process multiple demands at once; therefore, they do not have the capacity to meet the current needs of National Defence and other federal organizations, let alone the increased demand that new issues such as increased traffic and environmental risks will create. These satellites will begin to degrade in capability after spring 2026 and the replacement technology will not be operational until at least 2035. This will leave the NWP without fully operational satellite surveillance for up to nine years at the most pivotal point in time for proactive action against the threat of climate change to national security.

This technology requires replacement or enhancement to meet the needs of national security in the changing climate. The satellites require the ability to monitor the rate of sea ice melt to prepare for future foreign use of the area, track foreign movements continuously throughout the NWP, provide full coverage of the area more often than every 10 hours, and perform disaster management and ecosystem monitoring applications simultaneously, without compromise. Other areas of surveillance that can be developed include remote sensing, use of meteorological stations, and citizen observation (especially Indigenous communities local to the area). The combination of updated surveillance mechanisms can ensure more complete surveillance, sufficient data collection and efficient information sharing.

Canada has the opportunity to co-produce and co-enforce a comprehensive plan with Indigenous

communities that establishes which actors are authorized to use the NWP, when the NWP can be used by these actors, what can be transported through the NWP, pollution management regulations (i.e., regarding waste and fuel) for vessels using the NWP, mandated responses for emergency environmental management (i.e., oil spills) and for illegal and/or unidentified ships present in Canadian waters. These criteria are vital to Canada’s sovereignty over the NWP.

Confidence in Canada’s Leadership

To secure the rights to govern the NWP, Canada must prove to its Arctic allies that it is the best-equipped state to manage climate-related security threats in the NWP. National Defence argues that Canada must boost its ability to respond to new safety and security threats in the Arctic resulting from increased traffic. Among Arctic states, Canada is viewed as being too under-resourced to research, survey and defend the territory against these growing security threats. Building Canada’s physical capacity is essential, as is strengthening relationships with Arctic allies so they feel that they can trust Canada to effectively manage the NWP.

As tensions over Arctic sovereignty rise, the Minister of Foreign Affairs’ Mandate Letter encourages GAC to leverage its Arctic partnerships (Government of Canada 2021). Doing so can provide access to the critical resources that Canada needs to strengthen its leadership, while proving to its Arctic allies that Canada is capable of Arctic leadership. Two specific partnerships could strengthen or hinder Canada’s Arctic security priorities, depending on whether GAC leverages them now. First, Operation NANOOK is Canada’s best mission for enhancing Arctic research and surveillance capabilities (National Defence 2013). In the past, NANOOK has invited Arctic states and local Inuit populations to participate, under the guidance of its Canadian leadership. As Canada’s Arctic security concerns evolve, NANOOK’s operations and cooperative approach must also evolve to meet changing geopolitical and environmental conditions. Likewise, expanding Canada’s security capabilities will help meet North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) commitments, without getting involved in international military conflict.

Second, the new NATO Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence (COE) based in Montreal must place Arctic security as a core function. The NATO Climate Change and Security Action Plan recognizes

that “although NATO is not the first responder for every challenge related to climate change, the Alliance has a role to play in a comprehensive response to climate change” and that climate impacts on security are critical to integrate into its core tasks (NATO 2021). Security in the NWP can be presented as one of the first ways that NATO can turn this statement into action. If omitted from the COE’s mandate, NATO members will not have a critical strategy for coordinating Arctic security concerns or responsibilities.

Indigenous Sovereignty and Security

Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic is, in part, determined by the use and occupation of Arctic lands and waters by the Inuit peoples of Inuit Nunangut. For instance, Article 15.1.1 of the Nunavut Agreement (2010, p. 130) stipulated that “Canada’s sovereignty over the waters of the Arctic Archipelago is [also] supported by Inuit use and occupancy.” Canada’s Inuit are disproportionately threatened by climate change due to colonial forces that have reduced their capacity to withstand the impacts on their culture and traditional territory.

Given that Indigenous reconciliation is a core priority for the federal government under the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (Government of Canada 2019), Canada’s mission to maintain Arctic sovereignty must also foster a future where Arctic Indigenous peoples are thriving, strong and safe. This is necessary to fulfill the federal government’s commitment to a renewed nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples based on recognition of rights, respect, truth, cooperation and partnership, and for upholding Canada’s commitments to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Yet, security discussions with the Arctic Council and NATO have thus far largely excluded local Indigenous communities.

To avoid infringing on Indigenous sovereignty and instead heal the harms of the past, GAC must include affected Indigenous communities in security-related negotiations, project planning and international diplomacy activities. There are also significant knowledge gaps about Arctic climate change due to the NWP’s inaccessibility (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2022). Building this knowledge with local Indigenous communities and ethically integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into security measures can boost Canada’s knowledge of the region while meeting our commitment to reconciliation.

Recommendations

Prioritize the planning of surveillance for transportation and environmental management. GAC can initiate Indigenous-led plans to create an early response mechanism addressing the expected competition for jurisdiction over Canada’s Arctic waters, develop Canada’s Arctic surveillance capacity and enhance or replace current surveillance technologies and practices. To consolidate efforts and pool resources, these plans can be developed in partnership with Indigenous peoples, Inuit, First Nations and Métis, relevant territorial and provincial governments, relevant Canadian federal institutions such as the Canadian Military and Arctic Council partners.

Build confidence in Canada’s leadership in the Arctic. GAC can establish formal roles for Arctic allies in security missions that affect the NWP, including Operation NANOOK and NATO COE. This will secure critical resources to strengthen the country’s capacity and political buy-in for Canada’s leadership over the NWP.

Establish an Indigenous-led Arctic advisory group to facilitate respectful engagement, knowledge sharing and reconciled negotiations. This group can sit in on all internal and international meetings related to Arctic security. It can be composed of community-elected members of the groups affected by the NWP, who can have the opportunity to co-develop projects taking place in the region.

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