

# ACTIVITY REPORT



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Panel Presentations by Lindsay L. Rodman, Iris Ferguson, and Andrea Charron

## The North American Arctic: Security Challenges and Opportunities

Danielle Cherpako

NAADSN Graduate Fellow

Dr. Andrea Charron, Iris Ferguson, and Lindsay Rodman provide an overview of the security challenges facing the North American Arctic, as well as some opportunities for greater cooperation and collaboration between Canada, the US and partners in this region.

### Challenges Facing the Canadian Arctic

The world has never been more geopolitically contested, and this has serious implications for both Canada and the US. On a large scale, there are many problems associated with this contestation which concern Canada, including hegemonic struggles, power transitions, and reactionary nationalism. The current globalist/nationalist divide also has particular implications for the Arctic, with nationalists wanting to confirm ownership and control over decision-making, while globalists tend to want to ban activity in the Arctic in an attempt to protect the region. As a coastal state, Canada maintains a nationalist view of the Arctic, meaning that it is concerned with protecting its sovereignty in the region, while also combatting existential threats associated with climate change.

As was highlighted by a question about the security priorities of local Arctic actors, human security issues are also a significant priority in the Canadian context. Continuing efforts of reconciliation with Indigenous communities in the Arctic, consulting with Indigenous peoples prior to performing military exercises as is required under Article 30 of UNDRIP,<sup>1</sup> and finalizing the devolution of decision-making powers to local actors are all important responsibilities of the Canadian government. Arctic communities also face human-security challenges such as lack of internet access, high travel, food, and living costs, and a lack of mental and other health services, among others. These concerns, are not unique to the Canadian context and are important to tackle.

## Changes to the US Perspective on Arctic Threats

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in how the US government views Arctic threats, with Arctic security becoming a more prominent policy priority, and the topic entering into everyday news coverage and discourse. Six themes related to the United States' changing conception of Arctic threats were identified and elaborated: 1) A shift in focus from environmental threats to threats from nation states, 2) A new focus on homeland defense 3) Increased concern about the rules- based order, 4) A shift in geographical perspective, 5) Increased interest in collective action and responsibility, and 6) A maturation of Arctic security conversations.

First, whereas the US once emphasized environmental threats in the Arctic, threats from other nation states are now an equally important Arctic security priority from the US perspective. The government has explicitly named Russia and China as significant threats in the region.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps more important is the second point, which is that until recently, the US largely saw the North American Arctic as a frontier, or as a strategic buffer zone where conflict was unlikely to occur.. Indeed, the June 2019 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy explicitly refers to Russia and China as posing challenges, "to the homeland."<sup>3</sup>

Third, the rules- based order has always been emphasized in Arctic relations, (particularly through the Arctic Council forum), but there has been rising concern that this order is being undermined. Russia has been challenging rules through its excessive controls over the Northern Sea Route and its jamming of other states' GPS and radio signals during NATO exercises, while China has been pushing 'debt- trap' diplomacy. The US and allies are now forced to contend with the challenge of seeking to hold these states accountable for their actions.

Fourth, while the use of the East- West framework for viewing the world has lingered post- Cold War, the US is now more frequently viewing the world from a polar and top- down perspective. Additionally, emerging Arctic security challenges are now being discussed across all domains, including maritime, air, and space, land and cyberspace.

Fifth, the US has been looking more closely at its internal operations and questioning which departments should be responsible for Arctic security and policy. It is now widely accepted that Arctic security is not the responsibility of just one department but rather must be jointly addressed.

Finally, the US conversation about Arctic security has matured, referring to a deeper and more specific focus on improving operational capability. Essentially, talk is transitioning to action, as tangible changes are now being considered by government.

## The US and Canada: Talking ‘past’ each other

It is clear, based on what has been said thus far of the Canadian and American perspectives, that their Arctic priorities diverge in significant ways. This idea is explored through the categorization of the US as a state that tends to think in strategic terms, and Canada as a state that tends to think in operational terms, both in the military sense. Essentially, the US thinks globally and in terms of its strategic position within the international community, whereas Canada’s focus is operational. Canada and the US are, then, speaking different languages when it comes to identifying security priorities. It is for this reason that one might say that when it comes to Arctic security and policy, Canada and the US are currently talking ‘past’ each other.

While both states at times receive criticism from one another and from other states for their positions, both perspectives can be considered valid. The US is often rightly characterized as security- obsessed, but it also *has* to be concerned about hard security concerns because of its global posture and the very real threats posed by Russia in the form of long- range bombers and now hypersonic missiles. As global hegemon, the US feels it has a responsibility to think more strategically and long- term in order to take on the threats posed by Russian military expansion in the Arctic. Canada, on the other hand, is often rightly characterized as passive when it comes to national and North American Arctic security concerns. However, from the Canadian perspective, there is no imminent operational threat to the Canadian Arctic, therefore rationalizing a prioritization of human security and development over hard security concerns.

The challenge of differing Arctic priorities can also be seen at the level of domestic public opinion. While conducting more Arctic military exercises and updating the North Warning System have proved to be politically popular in the US, Canada may continue to face greater difficulties in convincing voters that large- scale defence spending is a good use of public funds. However, some suggest that the issue of public approval is less significant than the issue of actually allocating resources for these changes once approved.

Ultimately, there are good reasons to take seriously the perspectives of both states. First, it is suggested that America’s allies should recognize that the US is limited in its resources and will require help in addressing any real hard- security threats. Further, any dialogue with the US should be prefaced by an understanding that the US is concerned that its allies are not prepared for threats from China and Russia, and that they are alone in considering the long- term threats. With the US feeling more vulnerable in recent years due to the return of the great power competition mindset, Canada’s underestimation of how serious this is for the US further complicates their relationship. At the same time, while the current US administration has not emphasized the human security element that is important to Canada, it is possible that future administrations might be more aligned with these concerns.

Engagement from participants on this topic involved a discussion of how military- related investments might contribute to economic development in the Arctic, therefore reconciling, to some extent, the differences between the US emphasis on hard security and the Canadian emphasis on human security. It is suggested that investments at the operational level tend to have a better economic impact, while investments with strategic

or longer- term goals do not necessarily contribute to economic development. U.S. Icebreakers provide a good example of an 'in- between' investment, because of their dual- use capability.

Participants also asked about the role of the Arctic Council in addressing some of the challenges posed by the presenters. While the council has been an effective forum for non- security related topics such as search and rescue and sustainable development, the tone of the council changes depending on which state is acting chair, and security- related issues are not discussed. Related to this question, participants asked whether a pan- Arctic security forum ought to be established to address the security component. Presenters grappled with the notion that on the one hand, it is important for decision- makers to understand the motivations and intentions of potential adversaries, and that structured dialogue is perhaps better than no dialogue, while on the other hand, Russia's behaviour since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has not been indicative of a genuine interest in collaboration writ large outside of the Arctic Council. It is noted that while not currently used to their full potential for dialogue with Russia, some avenues for such discussion do exist, such as the Arctic Coast Guard Forum.

## Opportunities for cooperation and collaboration

Despite many aforementioned challenges, there are also opportunities for cooperation and collaboration between Canada, the US, and other allies in the Arctic. First, the Department of Defense's 2019 Arctic strategy encourages allies to become more involved in the Arctic than is typical of American defence doctrine. As a result, Canada may be able to use its extensive Arctic experience to help shape US Arctic priorities in non- strategic domains.

In the domain of Arctic Science, there is significant opportunity for continued and increased collaboration while improving surveillance, communication, and understanding of environmental issues. This collaboration already occurs and can continue to expand through research groups such as MOSAiC,<sup>4</sup> working groups of the Arctic Council in partnership with communities and Indigenous knowledge- holders, and through data- sharing between Canada, the US, and allies. Scientific collaboration is not only ideal for building common ground and addressing human- security issues, but the data collected can, in some cases, also be leveraged for hard- security purposes.

Finally, the existing CANUS advice architecture (the Permanent Joint Board on Defence, its Military Cooperation Committee, the tri-Command USNORTHCOM-NORAD-CJOC etc.) has the potential to be used to organize and plan for changes in the Arctic. The audience has asked to consider a number of questions which might be further discussed within the CANUS framework: Does the tri-command structure, especially as it relates to the Arctic, need revisiting? Should Canada, like the US, have an Arctic capability Advocate (ANR commander)? Are current exercises truly testing novel scenarios by simulating the disappearance of key nodes of capabilities and information and simultaneous crises and disasters? Can we sustain exercises in the Arctic for long periods of time? Finally, are we giving due thought to Article 30 of UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples?

Addressing a question about the possibility of a united Arctic strategy, presenters agree that the creation of a comprehensive North American Arctic Strategy would be beneficial to all states, since borders do not matter from a threat perspective. It is also suggested that beyond building interoperability, Canada and the US need to recognize the different security concerns in one another? in order to build trust.

## Conculsion

While the presenters agree that Canada and the US have significantly different understandings of Arctic threat priorities, they also each emphasize the importance of renewed partnership in regard to Arctic security, whether through existing architecture such as NORAD, NATO, and CANUS, or through new avenues such as the creation of a North American Arctic Strategy.

The presenters leave the audience with a number of questions to consider: How can Canada contribute to defining Arctic strategies for the US in non- security domains? What might a North American Arctic strategy look like? To what extent is this talking 'past' one another a symptom of greater ills in the US- Canada strategic relationship?

It is important to remember, however, that despite its differences, Canada, like America's other allies, still remains affected by the hard security threats posed by Russia which preoccupy the US, and therefore has a clear interest in, and even responsibility to take seriously the US perspective. In order to reconcile the states' perspectives on a tangible level, it is suggested that the US demonstrate commitment to dual- use investments which take into consideration economic development and the interests of local populations. This may incentivize Canada's commitment to invest in long- term, strategic military infrastructure in its own Arctic territory. The US might also consider how Canada can be of assistance in identifying Arctic strategies in non- security domains.

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf), Article 30, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Defense Arctic Strategy (June 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF>.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Defense Arctic Strategy (June 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF>, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://mosaic-expedition.org>.