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Opinions and framing of the North Warning System from the Canadian North

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The North Warning System (NWS) is “a chain of unmanned radar sites that provides aerospace surveillance”¹ over North American airspace and is located in the Canadian and American Arctic. The NWS was built in the late 1980s and early 1990s and is no longer able to detect the full range of military threats, given recent developments in military capabilities. Military officials have been presented the modernization of the NWS as an imperative from a strategic perspective to meet an emerging Russia or Chinese threat equipped with new military capabilities².

The debate is also present in specialized media outlets and focuses for the most part on whether or not the NWS is needed to face these emerging threats³. Although valuable and insightful, these contributions are representative of the debate currently at play in Southern communities, while little is known about perspectives expressed by Northerners about this project. As James Fergusson points out, this information is necessary as “the government will have to engage Indigenous communities in the Canadian Arctic in meaningful consultations”⁴.

Hence, our objective is to analyze Northern Canadian media outlets to document how Northerners are perceiving or framing NWS modernization. While, of course, this does not substitute for meaningful consultations, the aim is to map out, in an exploratory fashion, the type of attention and level of interest devoted in the North to this issue.

Method

In order to conduct this analysis, we first collected our data, searching for news stories from Northern news sources that mentioned the NWS. Using the Eureka database, we selected five news sources: CBC North, *Nunatsiaq News*, *Nunavut News North*, *Whitehorse Daily Star*, and *Yellowknifer*. We then searched these sources for two sets of keywords: “North Warning System” and “Northern Warning System”. We added to the results by going directly to the websites of those news sources and using the same search terms, which allowed us to pick up stories that were not in the database. This resulted in a total of 92 news stories, published from January 2000 to June 2020.

We then read each article to identify whether it contained a Northern perspective on the NWS and its modernization. An article was considered to contain a Northern perspective if it contained direct quotes or paraphrasing of speech by individuals living or working in the North, including opinions of article authors, where these commented on the impact of the NWS on the North. Although 92 stories were published from January 2000 to June 2020, a review of the articles found 52 of the articles were not relevant, leaving us with 40 articles for analysis. The articles that were removed were considered irrelevant because they did not contain Northern perspectives on the NWS. In most cases, this occurred when descriptions of the NWS and its history were provided without commentary, usually as background information, or when Southern experts were giving their opinions. Other examples include discussions of NORAD’s Santa Tracking event, and articles about military operations taking place near NWS sites, but which did not focus on the NWS itself. Importantly, the views presented here often come from elite members of the community, either journalists themselves or those who were sought for interviews – often government officials or businesspeople.

In order to analyze the resulting data, we re-read the remaining articles to identify how the NWS was framed. We did not use a predetermined list of frames, but rather noted each frame as we read. Although we sought to identify as many frames as possible in each article, we generally found one frame per article, though on rare occasions up to three were found in a single article.

NWS Modernization in Perspective: Northern Media Outlets

Four frames occurred more than ten times in the data. These major frames are: NWS as contract, NWS as environmental impact, NWS as security, and NWS as job. In addition to these four major frames, one minor frame was located: NWS as infrastructure. Because this minor frame occurs entirely in the 2017-2020 data and occurs only a small number of times, we leave a discussion of this frame to the next section. Our framing analysis finds that the NWS is viewed mostly in a beneficial light, perhaps with the exception of its environmental impact, discussed further below.

The NWS is most often framed in an economic light, with a focus on two frames: NWS as contract, and NWS as job. The first of these frames occurs most often in discussing Raytheon’s winning of the NWS maintenance contract – which previously belonged to Nasittuq. While the Nasittuq Corporation included the Pan Arctic Inuit Logistics Corporation, the contract with Raytheon included clauses related to employment and benefits to be awarded to Inuit community members. However, the contract frame also arises with reference to

environmental impact where clean up contracts for spills at NWS sites are discussed. This contract frame is related to creating and keeping jobs for Northerners, especially Inuit, via contracts. However, we separated the contract frame from the job frame because the two do not always overlap. For example, although references to the NWS as job co-occur with stories of Nasittuq laying off workers and Raytheon hiring workers, they also co-occur with references to job fairs, education and career planning, and government investment in defence in the North. In the first two cases – references to job fairs and education and career planning – the NWS is mentioned as being represented at job fairs, or as a place to work after acquiring training and education. In the last case, government investment is seen as having the potential to produce jobs. Taken together, the two economic frames – NWS as contract and NWS as job – are mentioned in just under half of the articles. It is worth noting that this frame is quasi absent from media coverage by Southern media outlets⁵.

The NWS is also commonly mentioned in a security frame, which includes references to the need to modernize the NWS in order to deal with modern threats, as well as to the role of the NWS in protecting sovereignty. In these cases, it is sometimes difficult to disentangle Northern and Southern perspectives. In many cases, while the news sources are Northern and thus may be understood as representing Northern views (though, again, we highlight that these are typically *elite* views), they are sometimes quoting official (Southern) views themselves. For example, in one instance the MP for the Yukon is quoting Canada's official defence policy. The economic aspect is occasionally touched on in references to defence spending, but articles that combine both frames emphasize the security frame predominantly. As such, this concern coincides with a dominant frame also present in Southern media outlets.

The last major frame is the NWS as environmental impact. This frame always appears in relation to contamination at NWS sites, especially fuel leaks. One reason this frame occurs so frequently is that multiple media sources report on the same spill. Although it might be expected that reactions to spills would be negative, the data presents a more complex reaction. These cases tend to be presented in a factual tone, describing the spill and its cause (if known), as well as the steps being taken to clean it. Those interviewed are often government representatives, which may account for this tone. Even in the single instance that members of a community are interviewed about a clean-up, however, there is no criticism of the government or NWS. Finally, environmental impact is also occasionally mentioned alongside references to clean up contracts, perhaps suggesting an economic link.

Having painted a broad picture of Northern news discourse about the NWS from January 2000 to June 2020, we now turn to recent developments in the period from January 2017 to June 2020. This can provide a picture of recent perceptions about the NWS.

Recent Developments: 2017-2020

In order to understand recent Northern views on NWS modernization, we zeroed in on the 2017-2020 time period. Although 36 stories were published during this time, a review of these revealed that 20 were not relevant, leaving 16 that were. The reasons for articles to be found irrelevant were described in the Method section.

The most striking change in recent years is that the environmental impact frame is not used. This is likely because no spills have taken place during this time⁶. Additionally, the NWS is referred to less as a contract, as the Raytheon-Nasittuq competition for the NWS maintenance contract is no longer in the news. However, it is mentioned in light of the creation of a new lobby group: the Inuit Development Corporation Association. Despite these changes, the NWS as job frame and NWS as security frame remain important in the 2017-2020 articles. The security frame is used most often, in the manner discussed in the previous section, highlighting a convergence with the most popular frame displayed in Southern media. The job frame is the second most common frame, again in the manner discussed above, emphasizing that the NWS is perceived by many Northerners as an economic opportunity rather than solely being cast in geostrategic terms.

Finally, one new frame appears twice in the recent data: NWS as infrastructure. This frames the NWS in terms of the upgrades it brought to air fields when it first came into existence. This historical view is connected to arguments that increased defence investment in the North will bring further infrastructure developments. The low number of mentions suggest that Northerners are not perceiving that the NWS could produce spillover effects that translate into addressing the Northern infrastructure gap.

Conclusion

Viewpoints published in Northern media outlets converged with Southern outlets on the geostrategic importance of the North Warning System and its importance for Arctic sovereignty and security. This frame grew in popularity in the past four years, at a time when the NWS modernization has started to be raised by military and political officials.

The quasi-absence of the environmental frame is somewhat of a surprise. However, this is likely to change as NWS modernization plan become more tangible, especially if new sites (further North) are selected for radar installation. The staunch opposition of many civil society groups to the expansion of Mary River's mine should be an example to keep in mind: the choice of locations will be pivotal to alleviate ecosystem disruption and minimize the impact on cultural practices. A meaningful, transparent and comprehensive consultation process is in order to increase social acceptability.

Finally, the dominance of the economic frame has to be noted. The NWS is perceived from a mostly economic lens in the North: Northern and Inuit companies are positioning themselves already to reap the potential benefits out of this modernization project⁷. As noted by James Fergusson, the Government of Canada will have to balance ensuring economic impacts and benefits for Inuit communities at the same time that they negotiate a cost-sharing arrangement with the U.S. partner⁸. This might prove to represent the most important factor to ensure that Northern stakeholders are on board with NWS modernization, beyond the security justification and geopolitical considerations.

- 1 Department of National Defence. North Warning System. Retrieved on July 29 2020 at: <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/news/article.page?doc=north-warning-system/hgg87x9w>
- 2 See for example The Canadian Press. Senior Canadian military officer warns NORAD needs upgrades as Russian, Chinese militaries advance. Globe and Mail, January 29 2020, retrieved from: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-senior-canadian-military-officer-warns-norad-needs-upgrades-as-russian/>; The Canadian Press. NORAD chief urges speedy defensive upgrades amid spectre of new Cold War. Toronto Star, February 12 2020, retrieved from: <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2019/02/12/norad-chief-urges-speedy-defensive-upgrades-amid-spectre-of-new-cold-war.html>
- 3 See for example Legion Magazine. Face to Face: Is the North Warning System obsolete?. Legion Magazine, January 2 2020, retrieved from: <https://legionmagazine.com/en/2020/01/face-to-face-is-the-north-warning-system-obsolete/>; Vivienne Machi. United States, Canada Studying Options to Replace Arctic Early Warning Radars. National Defense, July 27 2018, retrieved from: <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2018/7/27/united-states-canada-studying-options-to-replace-arctic-early-warning-radars>
- 4 James Fergusson. Missed opportunities: Why Canada’s North Warning System is Overdue for an Overhaul. Macdonald-Laurier Institute, January 2020, retrieved from: https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/20191219_NORAD_Fergusson_COMMENTARY_FWeb.pdf
- 5 Mathieu Landriault, Paul Minard and Praneel Gayan. The Continental Defence Debate in the Canadian Public Sphere – Evidence from Traditional Media and Parliamentary Committees. North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, Trent University, August 19 2020. Retrieved at: https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20-aug-Policy-Primer_Landriault_Minard_Gayan-PWL-edited-1.pdf.
- 6 Government of Northwest Territories. NWS – North Warning System. Retrieved on August 21 2020 at: <https://www.enr.gov.nt.ca/en/spill-location/nws-north-warning-system>
- 7 Jim Bell. Arctic-wide Inuit group wants to recapture North Warning contract. Nunatsiaq News, August 19 2020, retrieved at: <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/arctic-wide-inuit-group-wants-to-recapture-north-warning-contract/>
- 8 James Fergusson. Missed opportunities: Why Canada’s North Warning System is Overdue for an Overhaul. Macdonald-Laurier Institute, January 2020, pp.4-5. Retrieved at: https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/20191219_NORAD_Fergusson_COMMENTARY_FWeb.pdf