

# ACTIVITY REPORT



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## Sovereignty or Security? Canada's Arctic Strategies in Changing Political and Geopolitical Contexts

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An eminent historian on the Canadian Arctic, [Shelagh Grant](#) (1938-2020) taught history and Canadian Studies at Trent University for seventeen years. Her myriad contributions to scholarship include [Sovereignty or Security? Government Policy in the Canadian North, 1939-1950](#) (1988) and [Polar Imperative: A History of Arctic Sovereignty in North America](#) (2010), which encouraged critical reflections on the connections between sovereignty and security in the Canadian North in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

This one-day workshop, convened by Dr. P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Canada Research Chair in the Study of the Canadian North at Trent University and NAADSN Lead) and Dr. Elizabeth Elliot-Meisel (2022 Fulbright Chair in Canadian Studies at Trent University) in honour of Shelagh Grant, was hosted in a hybrid (in-person and virtual) format and brought together established and emerging scholars and thinkers to discuss various topics related to sovereignty and security in the Canadian and Circumpolar Arctic. The event consisted of four panels and included a keynote presentation by [Dr. Ken Coates](#) who holds the Canada Research Chair in Regional Innovation, at the Johnson – Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan. If past is prologue, this event's celebrated Grant's work, using it – somewhat contradicting Dr. Coates's address – as a guide for the policy challenges of sovereignty and security facing the Canadian Arctic.

### Conceptualizing Cold War and Contemporary Relationships

The first panel opened with Dr. Lackenbauer situating Grant's influential work in the historiography of the Canadian Arctic. He first outlined the importance of narratives: the many forms of "Arctic exceptionalism" in circulation; pithy sentences at the start of most policy statements that bundle together resurgent major power competition, climate change, uncertain boundaries, increasing accessible resources and shipping routes, and emerging technologies as generating rising Arctic defence concerns; and ambiguity in the language around "sovereignty." Emphasizing the more coherent and precise strategic messaging, he also spoke to the weight of history in framing current assumptions and expectations. Lackenbauer explained how Grant set the tone for much of the Canadian historiography on Canada's Arctic sovereignty over the last thirty five years, which cast the Americans in the role of antagonist, advancing defence and security agendas that threatened Canada's

interests. In order for the US to fulfill this role in the narrative, it must be considered a threat – a superpower with modern technology and equipment that make it capable of freely entering Canada’s Arctic, operating in the region, and even possibly usurping Canadian control. This narrative of bilateral competition, most systematically developed by Grant, has invited further research and reinterpretation by many of the historians participating in the workshop. Tracing the broad contours of the sovereignty-security balance since the interwar period, Lackenbauer articulated an alternative narrative arguing that, rather than sacrificing sovereignty in the interests of continental security, the Canadian government ultimately exercised and even advanced its sovereignty position. He left the audience with questions that Grant grappled with and which continue to animate discussions today: How do interpretations of sovereignty, and practices associated with it, intersect with ideas about security, safety, stewardship, and resiliency? As essentially contested concepts, how do we make analytical sense of them? And how do Canadian understandings of Arctic interests and priorities shape our interactions with other Arctic and non-Arctic state, Indigenous, sub-state, non-state, private sector actors?

Dr. Daniel Heidt picked up on several of these themes in his presentation on the Joint Arctic Weather Stations (JAWS), built and co-run by Canada and the United States from 1947-1972. Reflecting on [a recent book](#) co-authored with Lackenbauer, he notes how previous historians – including Grant - who have examined the weather stations have focused their attention on high level political deliberations that led to the establishment of the program and the stations established in Canada’s High Arctic. In his presentation, Dr. Heidt demonstrated the value of moving beneath the level of high level government negotiations and exploring the relations that developed, over time, at various levels. He explained how the establishment of these meteorological outposts reinforced the importance of adaptation to physical and human environments in the region, as well as the role of personality and leadership in influencing how Canadian and American personnel coped with isolated and confined environments – and with each other.

Dr. Elizabeth Elliot-Meisel expanded the aperture on this Cold War bilateral cooperation, reconsidering the overall relationship in the Arctic in terms of continental defence and security. It was a relationship marked by the conundrum of perception rather than reality. The Canadian perception was that it was losing its sovereignty over its Arctic to the United States. This, she argued, was false. Canada had the real estate but the U.S. had the resources to defend North America. The Soviet Union posed a threat to both countries. Through a combination of preparedness and diplomacy, Canada’s sovereignty was not sacrificed in the defence of North America. Dr. Adam Lajeunesse (presenting virtually) focused on Canada’s Northwest Passage and practical cooperation and legal conflict over the status of waters with the U.S.

Next, Dr. Peter Kikkert presented on emergency preparedness and search and rescue (SAR) in the Arctic. SAR occurrences will only be exacerbated by climate change, he warned. This is something



Northerners are deeply worried about. However, none of this is new, being a concern since at least the 1960s but there is still a lot of work to be done. There are no “natural disasters,” he argued – they are created by policies, programs, and lack of preparedness – societal vulnerabilities. He asked how communities, governments, NGOs work together to strengthen resilience give that many Northerners are far from help and need to be self-reliant despite limited infrastructure? What often happens in the North does not line up with the literature on disaster response – especially at the local level where there is always room for improvement. He concluded the panel with lessons learned (emphasis on the learning) and how they can be translated into new policies, programs, and efforts towards better preparedness against humanitarian and environmental emergencies.

During the panel discussion, participants observed how many of the issues during the Cold War are still here today, especially surrounding how Indigenous peoples fit into notions of sovereignty and security. Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine underscored this drive, with a discussant noting that the military is focused on the “hard security” of continental defence that largely ignores the broader security concerns of Inuit or how they could help contribute to the security of North America. Another participant asked whether terms such as “sovereignty” and/or “security” are inadequate to capture what the panel was seeking to grasp, or whether we need to consider another concept. Another participant asked if there is a more progressive country in the world than Canada on the issues of integrating indigenous security concerns into the larger domestic policy agenda?

## Sovereignty: International Legal and Political Perspectives

The second panel opened with a virtual presentation by esteemed international law professor Dr. Suzanne Lalonde. She warned that the international legal definition of sovereignty is in danger of distortion due to comments by [Canadian officials](#). She argued that future threats to the Arctic should not be cast as threats to sovereignty. Lalonde points out that sovereignty is an inherent and fundamental pillar of the state – a country can only “lose” sovereignty if it chooses to abandon it over a long period of time. Dr. Rob Huebert questioned this, arguing that it’s a myth that Canada “won” its sovereignty and security. His myths include that Canadians care about Arctic sovereignty; that the U.S. is the only country that disputes the legal status of the Northwest Passage; and that Canada has history of well managing its Arctic. He concludes that the concepts of sovereignty and security have Canadian policy “tied up in knots.”

Dr. Marc Lanteigne presented virtually on the norms surrounding sovereignty and how they affect the Arctic. Norms are unwritten but implied codes of conduct and his presentation looked at the frequently of when a “rules based order” is invoked for the Arctic and by whom – specifically Arctic and non-Arctic states. China might be the biggest and loudest non-Arctic state but does not intend to challenge Arctic state sovereignty. Rather, it and other non-Arctic states, want to have a say in regional discussions and thus the ability to influence norms.



Rosemarie Kuptana closed the panel with a powerful presentation on her personnel and later professional experiences with efforts by Canada to use Inuit in Arctic sovereignty through the prism of colonialism. She argued that Canada (and the larger international community) must dismantle discriminatory aspects from the concepts of sovereignty and security to better achieve both. “We have suffered negative impacts from assertions of sovereignty through law, policy and practice that constitute serious violations of our collective right to exist and to live free as human beings,” she explained. “Mine was the first Inuit generation to catch the attention of the Canadian State. The policies and laws of that time were nothing short of colonial and inhumane. And supposed ‘good intentions’ do not legitimize human rights violations.” She cited how even basic notions of human security have been bent to serve Canada's claims to state sovereignty, while violating Inuit security. Examples include the High Arctic relocations, which [Shelagh Grant researched extensively](#).



“The perspectives and positions of Inuit on these issues are not academic exercises — they represent our continued fight for survival, and our right to thrive as a people in our homelands,” Kuptana eloquently explained. She noted that it “will take a long time to remove colonialism's effect and influence in judge made law and statute law and executive decision-making,” but that Inuit are determined to do just that.

## Lunchtime Keynote by Dr. Ken Coates

Dr. Coates paid tribute to Grant's work, observing that the conversations at this workshop were the same as those that she addressed thirty years ago - and would likely be the conversations we were having thirty years from now! He made three core points about the Canadian Arctic. The first is that Canada is the most historically illiterate country on earth. Educational priorities have ensured that our historical understanding is getting thin. The result is that we as a country do not look to the past for guidance. Second, Coates observed that Canada is the least “northern” of all the Arctic states. Our population is huddled along the southern boarder. Old “company towns” use to ensure that Canadians knew at least someone who lived in the North but many of them shut down long ago. Many Canadians who move North do so temporarily to make money before returning South – the country compensates by sending large amounts of public money. Lastly, Canada has a poor track record of following through on defence preparedness plans and promises. We have persistent procurement woes and a reliance on the U.S. which views us as a bit of a defence “leech.” Canadians have a particular anxiety about Northern defence because of this. These three points combine



to create a Canadian Northern Policy that is reactive (rather than proactive) in orientation, and focused on short-term and temporary solutions. Canada also lacks a real constituency for defence investments. Over the longer-run, these factors have led to an absence of vision and commitment over the long-term by federal governments, a situation Grant lamented over three decades ago.

## Northern Indigenous Peoples, Sovereignty, and Security

The third panel opened with a presentation by Dr. Evgeniia (Jen) Sidorova. An Indigenous Siberian (Sakha) from Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, Sidorova explained why it was important to decolonize Indigenous perspectives in history and other disciplines like international relations. States tend to focus on Indigenous concerns but not at an international level, leading to paternalism, low trust, and failure to operationalize Indigeneity as a set of common interests across countries. Dr. Will Greaves presented the missing chapter on human security from his [2021 book](#). He concluded that human security discourse of how states impose their authority on Indigenous peoples. Bianca Romagnoli presented her research from her studying with the Ranger Instructors of 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Ranger Patrol Group, had how they understand indigeneity and sovereignty. The final presenter, Ranger Instructor Sergeant Drew Lowry, offered a practitioner’s experience in working in the North. Lowry’s guiding approach to instructing was through finding “common ground” with his Rangers – usually oriented around how both he and Northerners take pride in calling themselves Canadian. However, he warned that in his interactions with Rangers that “it takes a lifetime to make a friend and a second to lose one.” This places a heavy burden on he and other Ranger Instructors tasked to implement directions from up the chain of command.



## Future Pressure Points

Leading off the final panel of the workshop, Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot gave a virtual presentation around hard security in the Arctic, the future of the Arctic Council, and climate and the energy crisis. She observed that both

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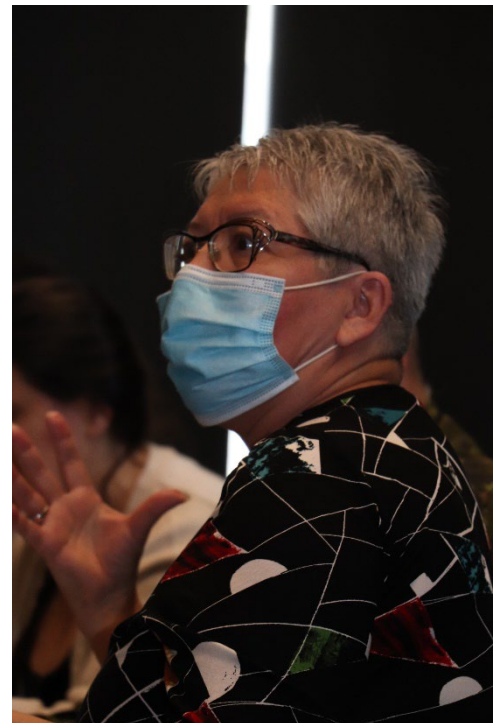


the role of NATO in the Arctic and NORAD modernization efforts need to stay one step ahead of both Russia and China. She questioned the future of the Arctic Council, stating that while things can stay low level for the next two to four years (barring major reform in Russia), something new might be needed between the like-minded Arctic states (the so-called “Arctic-7”). Much of her presentation looked at the tension between getting to “net-zero” to protect the climate while combatting the energy crisis. Here, she argued for the development of critical minerals as a way to transition while mitigating economic damage. She left the workshop with two questions: how much hard military security influences the U.S. and how Canadian NGOs and think tanks make life harder for military practitioners like Sgt. Lowry.

Bridget Larocque followed up on earlier presentations referencing the Arctic Council, asking what the institutional framework of an A7 Arctic Council would look like, and how that conversation could be had with the Permanent Participants (PPs). Her presentation thus centred on the Indigenous/state relationship. She argued that policies developed in Ottawa were poorly implemented across the North. Money was not the answer. Historic, intergenerational trauma must be overcome to get to a state of prosperity in the North. While unfulfilled treaties and land claims agreements must be honoured, how can Indigenous Northerners discuss matters of self-determination when struggling with identities and ways of knowing? Ultimately, she argued for healing leading to healthy communities as the way forward towards a more prosperous future for Canadian Arctic peoples.

Dr. Stéphane Roussel looked back at how Arctic security was posited during his career to offer recommendations of the future. He argued that the notion of “stewardship” was a key variable, and that discussions of sovereignty and security distracted from it. Pursuing an agenda of stewardship would help ensure that we invest in the right priorities in the North, mitigate Canada’s propensity to overburden the military with roles there, and help moderate public pressure to respond to the symbols of sovereignty and security. Dr. Andrew Bresnahan followed with a virtual presentation on foreign interference in the North’s economic security via cyber and influence operations. He presented examples from across the Arctic, seeking to establish a baseline for participants to grow awareness of how these foreign activities are conducted and from which they could anticipate future actions.

Dr. Kari Roberts closed the day with a presentation on Russian action in Ukraine and the narratives that Canada uses to frame these actions. Canadians may want a Russia that is a reliable international partner but must understand that Russia is suffering from “post-Imperialist stress syndrome” (PISS).<sup>1</sup> She argued that many of the internal security types that seized control of Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union have essentially run out of ideas, placing tremendous pressure on Putin to take the PISS and embrace an aggressive nationalism. In response, she argued, Canadians must be careful to not fall back into old Cold War narratives and logic as to how Russia *should* behave – this modern situation is different from that previous conflict.



Discussions made clear that, while Russia is unlikely to invade the Canadian Arctic in the foreseeable future, the “great game” is now clearly underway internationally — whether Canada wants it or not. Russia is the cause of this and it is not up to Canada to “solve.” Canadians will have to learn to manage this threat. This has not yet translated into Canada dramatically re-organizing its defence priorities, particularly in the Arctic. However, Canadians must grow cognizant of internal Russian narratives around a consolidated West seeking to collapse Russia into chaos. Looking at the role of narratives and information warfare from an Arctic perspective, discussion turned to the Arctic Council and the role of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON). Concluding on a domestic note and notions of human security, participants acknowledged that, regardless of the critical narratives of Canada that are taking hold across the North, only the Arctic states have the capacity to mobilize resources on the scale necessary to address persistent social welfare needs and inequities in the Circumpolar Arctic.



## Conclusions

Notions of Arctic sovereignty discussed during the workshop varied little in content or proportionality from the larger academic and policy discourse surrounding the concept. What stood out during this event was a clear acknowledgment that responses to the legacy of colonialism in the North imposed in the name of sovereignty will require a multigenerational commitment. There are no easy, short-term policy solutions. Regardless of the specifics of future sovereignty policies for the North, discussions suggested that these policies be vertically integrated – that is they prioritize the individual right up through the levels of analysis to the international perspective. It will be up to future policymakers to calibrate the appropriate level of priority per level of analysis depending on the policy. It is important that no level of analysis is disconnected and ignored in any policy prescription or consideration.<sup>2</sup>

If notions of sovereignty should be better vertically integrated to improve future policy, discussions of security must be more horizontally integrated.<sup>3</sup> This workshop saw a significant change in the security discourse surrounding the Canadian Arctic. The War in Ukraine had changed discussions from those focused on human or “soft” security concerns that had dominated such discourse since the end of the Cold War towards a more traditional, state-centric defence focus. Indigenous and other domestic human security concerns were still present but were balanced by a strong emphasis on national and continental defence concerns. Canada’s Arctic security strategy will have to include harder security concerns in the larger and changing geopolitical context of the region in ways that do not marginalize or dilute concerns at the human or individual level of analysis.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Pain, “The Imperial Syndrome and its Influence on Russian Nationalism,” in *The New Russian Nationalism*, eds. Pal Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, 46-74 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> David J. Singer, “The level-of-analysis problem in international relations,” *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (1961): 77-92.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, “Broadening the agenda of security studies: Politics and methods,” *Mershon International Studies Review* 40, no. 2 (1996): 229-254.

The day ended with a book launch for the edited volume *Lines in the Snow: Thoughts on the Past and Future of Northern Canadian Policy Issues*, edited by Clive Tesar and P. Whitney Lackenbauer. This was the culminating publication of the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee (CARC), an organization that encouraged a better-informed national conversation about northern development from 1971-2021, providing opportunities for experts from diverse backgrounds to elaborate policy alternatives for the north and to comment on national policy initiatives. This volume includes excerpts from past CARC interventions across twelve policy areas alongside original insights from expert commentators on future issues and opportunities for the Canadian North.

An open access version of the book is available at:

<http://lackenbauer.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CARC-Lines-in-the-Snow-final-2021.pdf>

