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Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy: Key Takeaways for Arctic Security Practitioners and Scholars

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On 6 December 2024, Canada released its revised statement on *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy (CAFP)*¹ which “supplements” its 2019 *Arctic and Foreign Policy Statement (ANFP)* “International chapter”² in light of profound geostrategic changes globally that have spilled over into Arctic affairs. Minister of Foreign Affairs Mélanie Joly’s foreword paints a dramatic picture lamenting how:

for many years, Canada has aimed to manage the Arctic and northern regions cooperatively with other states as a zone of low tension that is free from military competition. ... However, the guardrails that we have depended on to prevent and resolve conflict have weakened. Russia’s illegal war in Ukraine has made cooperation with it on Arctic issues exceedingly difficult for the foreseeable future. Uncertainty and unpredictability are creating economic consequences that Canadians are facing everyday.³

Minister Joly was careful neither to cast the CAFP as the culmination of a new full-scale co-development process like the one that yielded the ANFP nor as a full strategy like *Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy* released in 2022.⁴ Instead, the policy statement reiterates that Canada’s desired end state is “a stable, prosperous and secure Arctic” with “strong and resilient Arctic and Northern communities,” with Canada’s foreign policy serving to “advance the interests and priorities of Indigenous Peoples and northerners who call the Arctic home.” Similarly, the Conservatives’ 2010 *Statement on Arctic Foreign Policy* set its vision for the Arctic as “a stable, rules-based region with clearly defined boundaries, dynamic economic growth and trade, vibrant Northern communities, and healthy and productive

ecosystems.”⁵ In this sense, rather than representing “a fundamental change in how we look at the Arctic”⁶ one might see the 2024 statement as a logical continuation of Canada’s Arctic foreign policy since the late 1990s,⁷ albeit with a much stronger emphasis on defence and security, and thus one that should garner support across federal party lines.

Previous Arctic Foreign Policy Statements

Recalling previous Arctic foreign policy statements helps to put the current one into context. While the Liberal governments of Pierre Trudeau and the Conservative ones under Brian Mulroney grappled with sovereignty and security issues, they did not produce standalone Arctic foreign policy statements. The point of origin for those appearing in the twenty-first century might begin with the 1997 report of the all-party House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade on *Canada and the Circumpolar World*, which recommended that Canada’s relations focus on international Arctic cooperation through multilateral governance (particularly the Arctic Council) to address pressing “human security” and environmental challenges in the region. “Nothing illustrates more dramatically the link between domestic and foreign factors than the state of the Arctic environment,” committee chairman Bill Graham reported in this report. “That environment, so special and so fragile, is particularly sensitive to foreign influences.” *Canada and the Circumpolar World* accepted that the concept of security had broadened from military issues to encompass an array of social and environmental issues. “This new agenda for security cooperation is inextricably linked to the aims of environmentally sustainable human development,” the report noted. “Meeting these challenges is essential to the long-term foundation for assuring circumpolar security, with priority being given to the well-being of Arctic peoples and to safeguarding northern habitants from intrusions which have impinged aggressively on them.”⁸

The Liberal government under Jean Chrétien embraced this emphasis on international cooperation. Although the government rejected the committee’s recommendation that the Arctic should become a nuclear-free zone, it did not perceive any national security crisis that warranted an increased military presence beyond a modest expansion in the number of Northerners serving with the Canadian Rangers.⁹ In 2000, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade’s *The Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy* (NDFP) revealed how environmental and social challenges were now predominant:

Both the tradition of transnational co-operation and the new emphasis on human security are particularly applicable to the shaping of the Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy. The circumpolar world that includes the northern territories and peoples of Canada, Russia, the United States, the Nordic countries plus the vast (and mostly ice-covered) waters in between was long a front line in the Cold War. Now it has become a front line in a different way — facing the challenges and opportunities brought on by new trends and developments. The challenges mostly take the shape of transboundary environmental threats — persistent organic pollutants, climate change, nuclear waste — that are having dangerously increasing impacts on the health and vitality of human beings, northern lands, waters and animal life.

The opportunities are driven by increasingly confident northern societies who, drawing on their traditional values, stand poised to take up the challenges presented by globalization. Whereas the politics of the Cold War dictated that the Arctic region be treated as part of a broader strategy of exclusion and confrontation, now the politics of globalization and power diffusion highlight the importance of the circumpolar world as an area for inclusion and co-operation.¹⁰

Framed by principles of Canadian leadership, partnership and ongoing dialogue with Northerners, the NDFP was rooted in four overarching objectives:

1. to enhance the security and prosperity of Canadians, especially Northerners and Aboriginal Peoples;
2. to assert and ensure the preservation of Canada's sovereignty in the North;
3. to establish the Circumpolar region as a vibrant geopolitical entity integrated into a rules-based international system; and
4. to promote the human security of northerners and the sustainable development of the Arctic.¹¹

Five years after its release, a DFAIT audit recommended that Canada focus its energies and resources on fewer NDFP initiatives, strengthen departmental and Canadian leadership in circumpolar affairs, “strengthen partnerships with other federal departments and agencies, territorial governments and land claims groups in light of increasing emphasis on horizontal and whole-of-government solutions and the continuing devolution of governance in the North,” and strengthen initiatives to engage Canadians, particularly Northerners and Indigenous Peoples.¹²

In 2005, the Liberals’ *International Policy Statement (IPS)* identified that the Arctic was now a priority area in light of “increased security threats, a changed distribution of global power, challenges to existing international institutions, and transformation of the global economy.” The next two decades were anticipated to bring major challenges requiring investments in new defence capabilities and creative diplomacy. “In addition to growing economic activity in the Arctic region, the effects of climate change are expected to open up our Arctic waters to commercial traffic by as early as 2015,” the IPS noted. “These developments reinforce the need for Canada to monitor and control events in its sovereign territory, through new funding and new tools.”¹³ Its focus was on surveillance, “unmanned” aerial vehicles, and satellites. Prime Minister Paul Martin’s government fell before it could deliver on its 2005 budget promises.

The early years of the Stephen Harper Conservatives’ government were marked by a sovereignty-dominated Arctic agenda framed around the oft-repeated phrase of “use it or lose it” and a focus on military instruments.¹⁴ Arguing that “the North needs new attention,” and that “new opportunities are emerging across the Arctic,” the 2007 Speech from the Throne marked a transition in its promise to “bring forward an integrated northern strategy focused on strengthening Canada’s sovereignty, protecting our

environmental heritage, promoting economic and social development, and improving and devolving governance, so that northerners have greater control over their destinies.”¹⁵ The following year, Prime Minister Harper reiterated how the four pillars constituted “a comprehensive vision for a new North, a Northern Strategy that will turn potential into prosperity for the benefit of all Northerners and all Canadians.”¹⁶ *Canada’s Northern Strategy: Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future*, released in July 2009, expanded on the four main pillars announced in 2007 and reinforced a message of partnership: between the federal government and Northern Canadians, and between Canada and its circumpolar neighbours. Although it trumpeted the government’s commitment to “putting more boots on the Arctic tundra, more ships in the icy water and a better eye-in-the-sky,” it also emphasized that Canada’s disagreements with its neighbours were “well-managed and pose no sovereignty or defence challenges for Canada.”¹⁷ Rather than a “use it or lose it” message, *Canada’s Northern Strategy* stressed opportunities for cooperation in the circumpolar world. The strategy cast the United States as an “exceptionally valuable partner in the Arctic” with which Canada has managed its differences responsibly since the Second World War. It also emphasized opportunities for cooperation with Russia and “common interests” with European Arctic states, as well as a shared commitment to international law.

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAIT) released its *Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy* in August 2010.¹⁸ This document, intended to elaborate on the international dimensions of the *Northern Strategy*, reiterated the importance of the Arctic in Canada’s national identity and Canada’s role as an “Arctic power” while outlining a vision for the Arctic as “a stable, rules-based region with clearly defined boundaries, dynamic economic growth and trade, vibrant Northern communities, and healthy and productive ecosystems.” The first and foremost pillar of Canada’s foreign policy remained “the exercise of our sovereignty over the Far North,” but the “hard security” message of the 2006-08 period was supplemented (if not supplanted) by an amplification in the tone of cooperation with circumpolar neighbours and Northerners. Reaffirming that Canada’s Arctic sovereignty is longstanding, well-established and based on historic title (rooted, in part, on the presence of Canadian Inuit and other Indigenous peoples in the region since time immemorial), the statement projects a stable, secure circumpolar world – but one in which Canada will continue to uphold its rights as a sovereign, coastal state.¹⁹

Other dimensions of the *Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy* reflected the interaction between domestic and international agendas in *Canada’s Northern Strategy*. Canada’s North is home to numerous world-class mineral deposits, and the country has a long-standing reputation for welcoming foreign investment in its resource sector. Trade and investment in resource development, a primary catalyst for the surge in international interest in the Arctic, are upheld as main priorities given that the mining and energy sectors are key drivers of northern economies and offer significant opportunities for economic and social development. Accordingly, the second pillar, “Promoting Economic and Social Development,” promotes the idea that creating a dynamic, sustainable northern economy and improving

the social well-being of Northerners is essential to unleashing the true potential of Canada's Northern Territories. The statement emphasizes that Canada is actively promoting Northern economic and social development internationally on three key fronts:

1. taking steps to create the appropriate international conditions for sustainable development;
2. seeking trade and investment opportunities that benefit Northerners and all Canadians; and
3. encouraging a greater understanding of the human dimension of the Arctic.

On 19 October 2015, Justin Trudeau's Liberal party won the Canadian federal election, bringing a strong domestic focus on Indigenous rights, conservation, and the health and resiliency of Northern communities, complemented by a renewed commitment to global climate change mitigation. Through bilateral statements with U.S. President Barack Obama in 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau reinforced a model for Arctic leadership that placed a clear priority on "soft security" and safety issues, abandoning the classic sovereignty-focused messaging of his predecessor.²⁰ Similarly, the Liberal government's commitment to replace the Northern Strategy, introduced by the preceding Conservative government, indicated a renewed emphasis on environmental protection and socio-cultural health of Northern Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, while the Liberal government reframed the political discourse on Arctic affairs that avoided the hard sovereignty and defence rhetoric that marked the early Harper era, Canada's priorities continued to affirm the relevance and importance of a comprehensive approach to Arctic defence and security. For example, the Trudeau government's 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, balanced investments in defensive capabilities to deter would-be adversaries with the development of capabilities to support unconventional security and safety missions in the Arctic.

On 10 September 2019, after four years of development, Canada's Liberal government quietly released its long-awaited *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (ANPF). The "whole-of-government, co-development" process that created the framework involved the three territorial governments, over 25 Indigenous organizations, as well as three provincial governments. This collaborative process represented the "profound change of direction" that the Government of Canada proclaimed in the opening sentence of the ANPF. The sixth and seventh goals highlighted measures to strengthen the rules-based international order in the Arctic. Emphasizing that the region is "well known for its high level of international cooperation on a broad range of issues," and "despite increased interest in the region from both Arctic and non-Arctic states," the ANPF committed to continued multilateral and bilateral cooperation in the Arctic. It confirmed the Arctic Council as the "pre-eminent forum for Arctic cooperation" complemented by the "extensive international legal framework [that] applies to the Arctic Ocean." Muscular language declared how Canada "is firmly asserting its presence in the North" and pledged to "more clearly define Canada's Arctic boundaries." There were also peculiar statements, such as the need to "regularize a bilateral dialogue with the United States on Arctic issues," with no clear explanation of where the bilateral relationship was deficient or what this meant.²¹

The overall tenor of the ANPF “International chapter” was generally optimistic and unabashedly projected Canada’s domestic priorities into the international sphere, emphasizing the desire for regional peace and stability so that “Arctic and northern peoples thrive economically, socially and environmentally.” It articulated Canada’s goals and objectives for the circumpolar Arctic in three key areas:

1. Strengthening the rules-based international order in the Arctic
2. More clearly defining Canada’s Arctic boundaries
3. Broadening Canada’s international engagement to contribute to the priorities of the Canadian Arctic

Innovative elements included promises to “champion the integration of diversity and gender considerations into projects and initiatives, guided by Canada’s feminist foreign policy,” and increasing youth engagement in the circumpolar dialogue. Unfortunately, concrete examples of opportunities or new mechanisms to do so were not provided. Similarly, promises to help Arctic and northern businesses to pursue international opportunities “that are aligned with local interests and values” were vague, and the Trudeau government’s vision for the Arctic Economic Council (AEC) unclear. Well-established priorities, such as food security, improving health care services, and suicide prevention, were presented with no reference to what had been done to forward these agendas internationally. There were some discernable policy changes, however. NATO was presented as a “key multilateral forum” in the Arctic – a clear shift from the reticence of previous governments who feared unnecessarily antagonizing Russia by having the alliance articulate an Arctic focus. Concurrently, the policy committed to “restart a regular bilateral dialogue on Arctic issues with Russia in key areas related to Indigenous issues, scientific cooperation, environmental protection, shipping and search and rescue.” Furthermore, Canada committed to “enhance the reputation and participation of Arctic and northern Canadians, especially Indigenous peoples, in relevant international forums and negotiations,” and to promote the “full inclusion of Indigenous knowledge” in polar science and decision making.²²

Since February 2022, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has sent shockwaves across the Arctic. While Russia has not signalled any similar aspirations for military conquest in neighbouring Arctic countries, the world has witnessed the further spillover of international tensions into circumpolar affairs and the Kremlin has shattered Russia’s credibility as a peaceful, law-abiding actor. Although Canada has often adopted language downplaying immediate conventional military risks to its Arctic, Russian aggression in Europe has prompted changes in assessments about the current and future security threat environment. Furthermore, worries about China’s growing intent to “play a larger role in the region” and concomitant security risks factor prominently in recent policy statements.²³ While Canada was hesitant about NATO members speaking about Arctic security in an Alliance context over a decade ago, this is no longer the case.

Canada's April 2024 defence policy update *Our North, Strong and Free (ONSF)* places an unprecedented focus on the Arctic – and particularly on Canada's Arctic. The document seeks to evoke a sense of urgency, alleging that environmental changes have increased regional accessibility and opened new threat vectors for competitors to exploit.²⁴ *ONSF* highlights three “powerful, connected trends” that are reshaping global geopolitics: climate change, autocracies and disruptive states (particularly China and Russia) challenging the international order, and new and disruptive technologies that “are rapidly redefining conflict and what it takes to be safe and secure.” *ONSF* also explains that “to address new threats through, to and in the Arctic and North, we will prioritize detecting and understanding threats across all military domains, increasing our military's presence, mobility and responsiveness in the Arctic, and robustly responding to threats when and where they materialize.” By extension, “this will also help address challenges to the safety and security of Indigenous and northern communities.” The document often fails to distinguish between domestic and circumpolar Arctic frames, fails to parse concepts of sovereignty and security, and introduces the idea of defending NATO's western and northern regions without defining or explaining Canada's roles beyond Canada's Arctic. While Minister Joly notes in her foreword to the defence policy statement that “Canada must meet these new and emerging threats with resolve,” insisting that “vigorous assertion of our sovereignty, particularly in the Canadian Arctic, is a fundamental priority,”²⁵ it remains unclear how Canada sees its responsibilities beyond the Canadian or North American Arctic.

Framing the 2024 *CAFP*

The *CAFP* focuses on three core areas: “asserting Canada's sovereignty, advancing our interests in the region, and promoting a stable, prosperous, and secure North.” The policy asserts that emerging threats since the launch of the 2019 *ANPF* have “triggered a need for a recalibrated approach to advancing Canada's national interests in the region” at present and in the future. Although the document proposes to follow Joly's concept of “pragmatic diplomacy”²⁶ – the idea that Canada must “be pragmatic and resist the temptation to divide the world into rigid ideological camps” of “democracies versus autocracies,”²⁷ thus allowing it to serve as a broker for non-aligned countries – the overall tenor of the *CAFP* places Canada as firmly in the NATO-US-Western democratic camp. There is no question in this document who Canada considers its core Arctic allies: the United States, Greenland, and the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). Other partners include non-Arctic European and North Pacific states (with Japan and South Korea singled out for particular attention).

Prospects for truly circumpolar cooperation are also constrained by geopolitical realities. Russia, which was framed as a potential Arctic partner in Canada's 2019 policy framework, is now clearly acknowledged as an adversary or competitor with whom there can be no “business as usual” given its brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine and disregard for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law. The “guard rails” that prevent conflict are “increasingly under strain” when it comes to the Arctic, Joly proclaimed at the launch of the policy on 6 December 2024. “The Arctic is no longer a low-tension

region,”²⁸ suggesting that any lingering notions of “Arctic exceptionalism”²⁹ – the idea that the region is insulated from global geopolitical dynamics – are now out of date. Furthermore, “threats to Canada’s security are no longer bound by geography; change is accelerating rapidly; and non-Arctic states, including China, are also seeking great influence in the governance of the Arctic,” Joly asserted in the foreword to the strategy. “To respond, Canada must be strong in the North American Arctic, and it requires deeper collaboration with its greatest ally, the United States. Canada must also maintain strong ties with its 5 Nordic allies, which are now also all NATO members.”³⁰

The CAFP is built around four main pillars:

- I. Asserting Canada’s sovereignty
 1. Leveraging diplomacy to support national defence and security
 2. Upholding the rules-based international order
- II. Advancing Canada’s interests through pragmatic diplomacy
 1. Strengthening Canada’s partnerships with Arctic allies
 2. Holding Russia accountable
 3. Pragmatic diplomacy with non-Arctic states and actors
- III. Leadership on Arctic governance and multilateral challenges
 1. Reinforcing the Arctic Council
 2. Addressing regional and global challenges
- IV. Adopting a more inclusive approach to Arctic diplomacy
 1. Ensuring Arctic diplomacy is informed by and benefits Arctic and northern Indigenous Peoples and other northerners
 2. Advancing Indigenous and northern foreign policy priorities
 3. Transforming Global Affairs Canada’s domestic engagement processes

In the following sections I offer some reflections about what remains the same, what has changed, and what is new in the CAFP. It does not offer analysis of all of the issues and proposals raised, focusing through a security lens on several key points.

What is the same

- “Canada remains deeply committed to the full implementation of the ANPF, to Arctic state primacy and to upholding the rules-based international order in the Arctic.” The first part affirms that Canadian Arctic foreign policy remains linked to its domestic Arctic and Northern policy, thus ensuring that the CAFP cannot be misconstrued as trumping the federal government’s domestic agenda. The desire for “Arctic state primacy” is a longstanding priority, insisting that the Arctic states are best positioned and equipped to understand the region and its peoples. Reiterating that Canada remains committed to “ensuring that maritime claims are addressed in a manner

that is consistent with international law” also gestures to the legality of Canada’s position on the Northwest Passage as historic internal waters as well as its submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in support of its extended continental shelf in the Arctic.

- The promise to “secure [Canada’s] national interests and ensure stability and prosperity for the Indigenous Peoples who live in the Arctic and the North.” While the Trudeau Government has prioritized reconciliation in its Arctic agenda,³¹ it should not overlook how previous governments (including the Martin Liberals and Harper Conservatives) had a similar strategic intent.
- The summary of key Arctic and continental defence and security investments are largely a rehash of *Our North, Strong and Free*, but the narrative frames how promised investments will protect NATO’s “Northern and Western flanks” to ensure “that Canada can engage the world and deploy from a secure based in support of NATO allies.” How exactly Canada intends to deploy *from* the Arctic, given that it does not base expeditionary forces in its Arctic, is unspecified but may relate to defence against threats *through* the Arctic.
- The United States is framed as Canada’s “greatest ally” and “closest partner and ally in the Arctic,” which resonates with previous descriptions of the US as Canada’s “premier partner” in the region.³² The CAFP reinforces how “close partnership with the United States is essential to the maintenance of a secure, strong and well-defended North American homeland, on which the 2 countries’ mutual prosperity depends.” The re-election of Donald Trump introduces uncertainty into the mix, however, as his criticisms of NATO and unpredictable behaviour with allies may disrupt our countries’ “unique relationship shaped by geography, history, shared values, common interests and strong people-to-people connections.”
- The CAFP retains language designating the Arctic Council as the “pre-eminent forum for Arctic cooperation,” while explaining that the Minister and Senior Arctic Official (SAO) meetings remain on pause (and presumably will continue to do so until Russia finds a way to restore a trusted place in the international system). It commits to increasing contributions to the Council and to preparing for its third chairship of the forum from 2029-31.
- Climate change remains a central theme, characterized as “both the most pressing and the most proximate threat to Canada’s security in the Arctic.” The linkages between climate change and security remain vague, however, apart from the common refrain that a reduction in sea ice in the Arctic Ocean opens new paths for encroachment on Canadian sovereignty (perpetuating an overgeneralized misconception about greater regional “accessibility” without attentiveness to domain or heightened uncertainty³³). Unfortunately, the *CAFP* conflates climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as threats amplified by climate change and those caused by it, leaving vague how the like-minded Arctic states might work together to address this “global problem.” Leveraging the expertise of NATO’s new Climate Change and Security Centre of

Excellence (CCASCOE), based in Montreal and created “to promote research and knowledge sharing on climate security threats in the Arctic and elsewhere,” may help to articulate clearer, practical pathways forward.

What has changed

- Russia, which was framed as a potential partner in the ANPF, is now a competitor that seeks to fundamentally undermine the rules-based international order and does not respect sovereignty, territorial integrity, or international law. It is referenced 53 times in the policy. “It is clear that Russia has no red lines,” Joly insisted at the CAFPF launch.³⁴ While the document shows how Russia poses a threat to North America as a “geographic vector” for weapons systems that would pass through the Arctic, it remains opaque about the threat that Russia poses to or in Canada’s Arctic. What “vulnerabilities” is Russia seeking to exploit in the Canadian Arctic, and what exactly are the “increasingly sophisticated” threats that must be “kept in check”?
- China, which is referenced 19 times in the text, is clearly positioned as a non-Arctic state competitor.³⁵ China’s ambitions to be a more influential regional actor are well documented, and the CAFPF casts it as a challenger to Arctic state supremacy that “can be expected to use all the tools at its disposal to advance its geopolitical interests, including in the Arctic.” The policy raises concern about China’s “regular deployment of dual-use—having both research and military application—research vessels and surveillance platforms to collect data,” as well as malign economic influence. It also leaves space for “pragmatic diplomacy,” asserting that “Canada will challenge China when it ought to and cooperate when its interests align with China’s,” such as addressing “pressing global issues—such as climate change—that have impacts on the Arctic.”
- Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic also appear to be changing, with Minister Joly stating at the launch event on 6 December that Russia is “reversing its historic posture by facilitating Chinese access” to the region, and particularly the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation.” The CAFPF notes that the two countries conducted joint military exercises in July, their warships have also participated in joint patrols in the Bering Sea, and their military aircraft were detected, tracked and intercepted by the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) while flying into Alaska’s air defence identification zone (but not transgressing US sovereign airspace. “This demonstrates the continued deepening of Chinese-Russian military cooperation, particularly in the North Pacific approaches to the Arctic,” the policy statement observes. While China’s desire to enter the Arctic and enhance its regional profile and prestige is well established, there is active debate on the Sino-Russian Arctic relationship in the region. Some call it a burgeoning “alliance” and others see as a circumscribed transactional relationship with deep-seated issues of mistrust remaining. The CAFPF seems to treat the Sino-Russian partnership as a preordained conclusion at this point, rather than a precarious relationship with friction points that could be exploited.³⁶

- “While the risk of military attack in the North American Arctic remains low, the region represents a geographic vector for traditional and emerging weapons systems that threaten broader North American and transatlantic security.” This is not new, although the document points to emerging threats such as “increased Russian activity in Canadian air approaches, China’s regular deployment of dual-use ... research vessels and surveillance platforms to collect data, and a general increase in Arctic maritime activity.” The statement also emphasizes that “adversaries and competitors also employ disinformation and influence campaigns, malicious cyber operations and espionage and foreign interference activities to target Canadians, including northerners.”
- NATO is referenced 22 times in the text, reinforcing that Canada accepts the relevance and importance of the Alliance in the region. With Finland and Sweden joining NATO, all five Nordic countries are now allies. The CAFP notes that “Canada remains committed to contributing to NATO and NORAD’s awareness of the threat environment across the Arctic region, including in the North American Arctic.” It explicitly connects “Arctic security and continental defence investments made in *Our North, Strong and Free* and NORAD Modernization” with support to “NATO’s deterrence and defence agenda by protecting the Alliance’s Northern and Western flanks.” This “ensures that Canada can engage in the world and deploy from a secure base in support of NATO allies, when needed.” After astutely noting that “the defence architecture and threat picture differ across the circumpolar north,” the Government of Canada commits to “continue to share information on threats in the Arctic with allies and to support NATO operations and presence in the European High North.” Details are not provided beyond reiterating that “Canada will continue to be an active participant in NATO exercises and operations.”
- The call for a greater Canadian diplomatic presence in the Arctic states could be construed as a reversal of GAC’s decision to closing its Canadian International Arctic Centre (CIAC) office in Oslo, Norway, and repatriating its chief to Canada, with a departmental spokesperson justifying that the move back to Ottawa would “allow the team to better cooperate with other government departments and agencies, enhance our capacity to deliver on the department’s international Arctic mandate, and strengthen implementation of the International Chapter of the *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework*.”³⁷ Has there been a change of heart?
- The CAFP identifies the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) as a partner in defence and security, emphasizing its role in maritime domain awareness and assistance to Arctic scientific research expeditions. It promises to expand Canadian partnerships with coast guards from like-minded states (which the *Canadian Coast Guard Arctic Strategy*, released in August 2024, says includes non-Arctic states such as the United Kingdom and Germany³⁸), but does not provide details. It also references but does not explain the role of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, created in 2015, which aims to strengthen operational collaboration and coordination of

activities between the eight member states. Is the latter an example of the “pragmatic diplomacy” where Canadian representatives can interact with their Russian counterparts?

- While ONSF projected military spending to reach 1.76% of GDP by 2029-30, the CAFP updated this figure to reach NATO’s target of 2% of GDP spending by 2032. This reflected Minister of National Defence Bill Blair’s announcement at the Washington NATO Summit on 10 July 2024 that the Royal Canadian Navy would purchase of up to 12 conventionally powered, under-ice-capable submarines.³⁹

What is “new”

- *Recognizing the North Pacific, through the Bering Strait, as a key approach to the North American Arctic.* Canadian leaders have understood this reality since the Second World War, when Canadians joined their American counterparts in the Aleutian Campaign against the Japanese. Since the Cold War, Canada has traditionally focused on the North Atlantic-Arctic connection, including the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap. By broadening the aperture to include North Pacific-Arctic interconnections, the CAFP connects to Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and also clarifies the extent of NATO’s “Western approaches.”⁴⁰
- *Open a new consulate in Anchorage, Alaska.* Canada closed its consulate in Anchorage in 2012,⁴¹ after which time consular services have been provided by the Consul General in Seattle, Washington.
- *Open a new consulate in Nuuk, Greenland.* The U.S. opened a consulate in Nuuk in 2010 (having closed its previous one in 1953)⁴² and Iceland has a consulate general there.⁴³ Canada’s announcement to open a consulate in Nuuk reciprocates the Government of Greenland’s announcement in its February 2024 Arctic strategy that it will establish a diplomatic representation in Ottawa and further develop its cooperation with Canada,” when it encouraged Canada to do the same in Greenland.⁴⁴
- *Initiate an Arctic security dialogue with the ministers of foreign affairs of like-minded states in the Arctic.* While Canada participates in the Arctic Chiefs of Heads of Defence meetings, Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, and other bodies which discuss “hard” Arctic security issues, there is no established dialogue mechanism on Arctic security between the foreign ministers of the seven like-minded Arctic states, all of whom are NATO members. Presumably this group will adopt a broader definition of security than the defence-oriented fora, although the parameters remain unspecified.
- *Appoint an Arctic Ambassador, with an office in Canada’s North.* Canada first appointed a Circumpolar Ambassador in 1993. Mary May Simon, now the Governor General of Canada, served in the position from its inception until 2003. The position was abolished under the Harper Conservatives in 2006. Under this new plan, Canada’s Arctic ambassador will “work with Arctic

allies and domestic partners including Indigenous Peoples and territorial and provincial governments to make linkages between Canada’s domestic and foreign policy agenda, advance Canada’s polar interests in multilateral forums, and raise awareness internationally of Indigenous rights in the Arctic context.” The ambassador will also work with Canada’s Chief Science Advisor⁴⁵ on issues related to Arctic science and research.

- *Expand information sharing with relevant territorial and provincial governments and Indigenous leaders on emerging and developing international Arctic security trends, including foreign interference threats.* This may seem like an oddly placed announcement coming from Global Affairs Canada to include in a foreign policy document, given that it relates primarily to internal Canadian information sharing, but it points to calls from the Territorial Premiers and Northern Indigenous leaders to be more engaged in foreign and defence policy decisions.
- *Support science and research coordination initiatives with foreign policy considerations as related to research security and science in the Arctic.* The new focus on Arctic science, and particularly marine scientific research (MSR), through a security lens reveals a burgeoning awareness of how competitors use science as a vector for data collection, intelligence gathering, espionage, and foreign influence. *ONSF* also states that the Government of Canada is seeing “a growing number of Chinese dual-purpose research vessels and surveillance platforms collecting data about the Canadian North that is, by Chinese law, made available to China’s military.”⁴⁶
- *Launch boundary negotiations with the United States regarding the Beaufort Sea and finalize the implementation of the boundary agreement between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark regarding Tartupaluk (Hans Island).* On 24 September 2024, Global Affairs Canada and the U.S. State Department announced that they have created a joint task to negotiate the Beaufort Sea boundary, a significant unsettled bilateral maritime dispute. At issue is a 21,197 km² wedge of ocean and seabed that both sides claim, as well as an overlapping continental shelf beyond the 200 NM Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Resolving this longstanding dispute which will signal how “common interests in the region have served as the foundation of our bilateral Arctic relations for many decades and will continue to guide our Arctic cooperation in the future.”⁴⁷ Implementing the Canada-Denmark agreement signed on 14 June 2022 seems straightforward, but provisions to ensure “continued access to and freedom of movement on the entire island for Inuit and local people living in Avanersuaq, Kalaallit Nunaat, and in Nunavut, Canada, including for hunting, fishing, and other related cultural, traditional, historic, and future activities” may serve as a precedent for other transnational Indigenous mobility rights.⁴⁸

Final Reflections

“Canada is an Arctic nation, and we are at a critical moment. We live in a tough world, and we need to be tougher in our response,” Joly said at a press conference on 6 December 2024. “I don’t think the Arctic

will be the primary theatre of conflict. I see the Arctic as the result of what is happening elsewhere in the world.”⁴⁹ Given the discussion about melting ice as a security threat, Russian militarization of its Arctic, and China’s ambitions in the region, this emphasis on the “spillover” of conflict from elsewhere might seem quite different than the way that Arctic dynamics are depicted in the policy itself. Unfortunately, the distinction between threats through, to, and in the Arctic remains rather opaque in Canada’s strategic messaging.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the CAFP provides helpful language parsing the North American Arctic and the European Arctic, linking NORAD and NATO, and articulating strategic challenges facing the region that require diplomatic, military, and whole-of-government responses.

The challenge remains in trying to situate the CAFP into Canada’s broader foreign policy, given that Canada has not produced a comprehensive statement on the topic since issuing its *International Policy Statement (IPS)* under the Paul Martin government in 2005. The Future of Diplomacy initiative discussion paper,⁵¹ which Minister Joly mentions in the foreword to CAFP, is no substitute. There is a similar challenge with respect to national security issues that fall outside of the mandate of the Department of National Defence. *Securing an Open Society: Canada’s National Security Policy*,⁵² which articulated Canada’s core national security interests and how the government intends to address these threats, was released in 2004. The world has changed a lot since then, as the CAFP highlights. This means that readers have to try to discern for themselves where the CAFP and its various commitments fit in Global Affairs Canada’s overall priorities.

In the end, the CAFP suggests that “the diplomatic initiatives in the Arctic foreign policy will complement all of these [national defence] investments by better aligning Canada’s strategic approaches and by strengthening its relationships with Arctic allies.” Providing foreign policy “top cover” or context for Canada’s 2024 defence policy update is timely and important. The question of follow through, particularly with public support for Trudeau’s minority Liberal Government facing historic lows according to opinion polls, looms over this regional foreign policy refresh.⁵³ “Policy is only as good as the action it inspires,” Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon noted at the unveiling ceremony of the Conservatives’ Northern Strategy in 2009. “Laying out a broad, integrated, and positive strategy is a step in the right direction,” I noted in an editorial at the time. “Converting the strategy to deliverables that produce a more constructive and secure circumpolar world will be the real challenge.”⁵⁴ After the release of the CAFP on 5 December 2025, the *Globe and Mail* passed along information from a senior government official that the new policy would receive \$34.7-million in initial funding and \$7-million in continuing funding over five years.⁵⁵ Presumably, most of this will go to the new ambassador position, consulates, and funding for youth, and Indigenous and Northern participation in various international forums and domestic engagement initiatives. What all of this will mean for Canada’s relationships with its Arctic allies and partners, particularly with a new Trump administration on the horizon, remains to be seen.

Appendix: Deliverables of Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy

From: [Global Affairs Canada](#)

Backgrounder

On December 6, 2024, the Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced the launch of Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy (AFP).

Funding for the Arctic Foreign Policy is \$34.7 million over 5 years, and \$7 million ongoing. This is in addition to \$8 million per year in ongoing funding for the Global Arctic Leadership Initiative under the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework.

The Arctic Foreign Policy will allow Global Affairs Canada to:

- **Appoint an Arctic Ambassador, with an office in Canada's North:** The Arctic ambassador will work with Arctic allies and domestic partners including Indigenous Peoples and territorial and provincial governments to make linkages between Canada's domestic and foreign policy agenda, advance Canada's polar interests in multilateral forums, and raise awareness internationally of Indigenous rights in the Arctic context. The Arctic ambassador will also work with Canada's Chief Science Advisor on issues related to Arctic science and research.
- **Open new consulates in Anchorage, Alaska, and Nuuk, Greenland:** The opening of these consulates will contribute to deepening Canada's diplomatic engagement with its neighbours, the United States, including Alaska, and the Kingdom of Denmark, including Greenland. This will make the Canadian and North American Arctic more secure and create new opportunities for economic cooperation, scientific collaboration and cultural exchange.
- **Initiate an Arctic security dialogue with like-minded Arctic states:** Discussions among foreign ministers could focus on sharing information and analyses of issues relating to international Arctic relations and security, discussing national approaches to cross-cutting security challenges, advancing opportunities for collaboration, and increasing collective resilience.
- **Expand domestic information sharing on emerging international Arctic security trends:** This will help ensure that territorial and provincial governments and Indigenous leaders are equipped to make informed decisions about the security of their communities.
- **Support domestic partners in taking into account a national security lens to foreign research in Canada's Arctic** including by holding an annual roundtable meeting.
- **Work toward resolution of Arctic boundaries:** Global Affairs Canada will deliver on Canada's commitments made under the Ilulissat Declaration for the orderly settlement of overlapping maritime claims and delineation of the outer limits of the extended continental shelf, by launching negotiations with the United States to resolve the unsettled Beaufort Sea boundary and continental shelf overlaps in the Arctic Ocean, and by finalizing the implementation of the

boundary agreement between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark regarding Tartupaluk (Hans Island).

- **Secure additional funding for the Global Arctic Leadership Initiative:** By increasing funding for the Global Arctic Leadership Initiative, Canada will strengthen its global leadership in the Arctic and continue to support initiatives led by civil society and Indigenous partners. For example, it will allow for more Canadian engagement and leadership in Arctic Council work that integrates environmental protection and sustainable socio-economic development crucial to Northerners livelihoods and ways of life. It will also increase the representation of Arctic and northern Indigenous Peoples at relevant international forums.
- **Enhance Canada’s diplomatic presence in the Nordic region:** A new position will be created in one of Canada’s Nordic embassies with regional responsibility for increasing coordination and information sharing, including on security issues, with Nordic partners.
- **Enhance domestic engagement on Canada’s Arctic foreign policy:** Global Affairs Canada will continue pursuing early, meaningful and sustained engagement with territorial and provincial governments, Arctic and northern Indigenous governments and organizations and northerners more generally. We will also explore distinctions-based engagements with First Nations, Inuit, Métis, Modern Treaty and Self-Governing Partners.
- **Establish an Arctic and northern Indigenous youth internship program:** To support its recruitment efforts and increase Indigenous perspectives in the department, Global Affairs Canada will establish a paid Arctic and northern Indigenous youth internship program that will consider the need of Arctic and northern Indigenous youths to remain close to their families and communities and ensure that appropriate support is in place.
- **Establish principles for cooperation with non-Arctic states and actors:** Given the prospect of growing competition in the Arctic, Canada will be strategic in prioritizing pragmatic cooperation with non-Arctic states and actors that align with Canadian values, interests and objectives.

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