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Security, Governance, and Community Resilience in the Arctic

Arctic Circle Assembly 2025 Activity Report

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The 2025 Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, Iceland, as with previous editions of this annual international conference, continued to offer an opportunity to reflect on how the Arctic has been affected by shifting geopolitics since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While debates about the future of the Arctic Council and Arctic governance remained top of mind for many participants due to this difficult international context, new challenges complicating circumpolar governance – this time with the USA at their center – also came to the fore. These challenges include the Trump Administration's skepticism of existing global governance mechanisms, its refusal to acknowledge and address climate change and other topics important to the Arctic Council including gender equality, the uncertainty President Trump has projected about the future of NATO and support for Ukraine, and the Administration's interest in striking a new relationship with Russia focused on economic development.

In addition to the ACA having limited or no official Russian representation at the conference since the 2021 edition, the 2025 ACA took place during the middle of the extended US government shutdown. This situation, along with changes to the country's federal workforce more broadly, prevented most representatives from the US government from being able to attend, further exposing the limitations of having debates about the Arctic without officials from two of the major Arctic states involved. Collectively, despite the strong presence of other Arctic states and Indigenous Peoples organizations (and meetings hosted by the AC Chair on the conference sidelines), these issues overshadowed much of the conference and framed a variety of conversations on the future of science, diplomacy, governance, security, and defence in the Arctic.

This activity report touches on two key themes that stood out to the author in those discussions: (1) an evolution of security dynamics that are refocusing policy and action on military and "total" security; and (2) the Arctic remains at the nexus of climate and socio-economic change, with regional norms continuing to be crucial to the

success of Arctic governance despite the many limitations being imposed on it. The discussions and exchanges across the ACA also demonstrated how the focus on community-level resilience and preparedness in both security/defence and governance camps are becoming increasingly overlapped, shaping both the policies of states and the lived realities of Arctic communities today.

1. Evolving Arctic Security: a focus on Military Defence and Total Security

Across multiple sessions – including the discussions on diverse notions of security and sovereignty, NATO-focused panels, and dialogues with municipal leaders on total preparedness – speakers highlighted a notable shift in how Arctic security is being conceptualized and operationalized. While the region has been primarily defined by cooperation and soft-security approaches since the end of the Cold War, current geopolitical pressures are refocusing attention on hard security, military capabilities, and comprehensive “total defence” frameworks that include community-level resilience. At the same time, this shift of the security agenda is reframing burdens experienced by Arctic municipalities, generating ethical considerations around dual-use infrastructure and increased military footprints, and raising questions about the place of scientific knowledge, Indigenous governance, and public trust within security planning.

Risks of Dual-Use Infrastructure and an Expanding Military Footprint in the Arctic

During the *Defending the Canadian Arctic* session organized by the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN), speakers emphasized that Canada’s renewed Arctic strategy frames security not only in terms of sovereignty and geostrategic presence but also in relation to human and community resilience. While many Arctic communities are already living with limited infrastructure and experience heightened vulnerability to external threats, the speakers in this session highlighted that careful thought needs to be put towards what role the military should play in developing infrastructure for civilian use. Ben Johnson spoke critically about the rising tendency to classify civilian infrastructure as “dual-use.” He argued that while dual-use designs or plans may appear efficient on paper, they introduce significant ethical, functional, and political complications, especially given that infrastructure with any military purpose risks becoming a military target. Whitney Lackenbauer raised a similar point in a session focused on the future of NATO, questioning whether this is a path states or communities are ready to go down for two key reasons: (1) some military infrastructure, by nature of related sensitivities, would not be accessible for civilian use; and (2) they could be targeted during conflict due to the military purpose they serve.

Similarly, Mia Bennett’s observations on Cold War histories in the session *Interdisciplinary Cooperation to Promote Arctic Securities* illustrated that national security actions – in Canada, Greenland, and elsewhere – have previously resulted in forced relocations and substantial harm to Indigenous communities. These historical examples were raised to caution that even well-intentioned security strategies may replicate patterns of displacement or disenfranchisement unless Indigenous perspectives are centered from the outset. These

discussions collectively signal that while expanding military presence and capabilities in the Arctic may be increasingly prioritized by states, community impacts must remain central. This includes considerations of land rights held by Indigenous Peoples, the legacies of colonial and Cold War interventions, and present-day operational risks.

NATO: Integrating Military Defence and “Total Security”

The *NATO and the Arctic* session provided deeper insight into how Arctic states understand this shift. Whitney Lackenbauer highlighted that NATO’s increased expenditure targets now comprise of 3.5% of GDP for military defence and 1.5% of GDP for what “Nordics might call total security.” This broader category includes community resilience, emergency preparedness, infrastructure reliability, social stability, and energy and communications security – encapsulated in [NATO’s seven baseline requirements for resilience and civil preparedness](#).

This framing emphasizes that military capabilities alone are insufficient. Arctic defence now requires strong civilian systems capable of withstanding environmental shocks, cyber intrusions, infrastructure disruptions, and other scenarios posing risks to communities. Viewing defence and security in this way integrates society itself into defence planning, which has deep implications for local governance, municipal responsibilities, and community-state relations. Olivia Wynne Houck’s historical reminder that Iceland contributed territory to NATO after the Second World War underscored another implication: that smaller Arctic states have long played strategic geopolitical roles, often absorbing the localized impacts of broader alliance politics.

Cybersecurity, Hybrid Threats, and Emergency Preparedness

The Arctic Mayors’ Forum’s *Total Preparedness in the Arctic: A Mayoral Perspective* session expanded the discussion from military strategy to the everyday realities of security and resilience at the community level. Municipal leaders from Iceland, Finland, and Sweden described increasingly complex responsibilities related to critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, emergency coordination, and demographic pressures on Arctic communities.

One Swedish mayor explained that her city recently endured a cyberattack that shut down electricity, prompting significant municipal investment in systems that can withstand future attacks. While these upgrades improve protection, they can also make operations slower or more cumbersome, illustrating the tension between security and usability. Similarly, Rovaniemi’s mayor highlighted that Finland’s accession to NATO is reshaping municipal planning. Local authorities in Finland now meet regularly with military officials to coordinate infrastructure usage – including roads, bridges, airports, and ports – that may be needed for troop movements or alliance operations. This increased coordination raises resource demands and fundamentally affects local governance.

An Icelandic municipality described the value of collective planning across regions through the Arctic Mayors’ Forum, describing the importance of sharing practices, tools, and emergency plans. Their preparations span

floods, earthquakes, extreme weather, and maritime incidents – risks heightened by both climate change and rising traffic in some regions of the Arctic due to increasing tourism. All three countries stressed the need for redundancies in power, communications, and mobility infrastructure as well as predetermined priorities for providing services during crises (e.g. schools, elder care, medical access). Regular crisis exercises were also raised as important to avoid improvised or overreactive responses during real events.

Leaders from Tromsø, Akureyri, and Rovaniemi described how increases in tourism – particularly cruise ship arrivals and winter recreation – routinely overwhelm local hospitals and emergency services. One speaker quipped that “when cruise ships line up, ambulances line up.” In Akureyri, cruise traffic has doubled to nearly 200 ships annually, placing increased pressure on local health and safety systems. Many tourists arrive with minimal winter experience, leading to elevated demands on rescue and accident response capabilities. When combined with aging populations and difficulty recruiting qualified workers across healthcare, emergency management, and infrastructure maintenance, these pressures can create vulnerabilities that national policies often overlook.

Amid the increasing focus on military defence, several speakers raised concerns that human security – food systems, cultural continuity, and community well-being – is being overshadowed. During the *Interdisciplinary Cooperation to Promote Arctic Securities* session, participants observed that funding is shifting away from societal and human security toward military initiatives. Speakers highlighted worrying trends exacerbating that concern, including an increasing rejection of scientific findings throughout society, rising attacks on the scientific method itself, and the worrying trend of climate, environmental, and health datasets being taken offline by the Trump Administration in the US. These developments were described as direct threats to Arctic resilience, given that effective emergency planning and governance depend on accurate, accessible, and local expertise. This discussion portrayed the idea that the fragility of knowledge systems that support community resilience therefore becomes a security concern in its own right.

Indigenous-Centered Approaches

Across multiple sessions – including discussions on notions of sovereignty, climate change, and municipal-level preparedness – Indigenous speakers and community representatives emphasized that security frameworks must incorporate Indigenous governance, Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), and relational approaches to land, water and community. Failing to do so risks replicating historical harms while also undermining long-term resilience. During discussions about the history of forced relocations and settlements in the Arctic, Heather Gordon described how the typhoon that landed in Alaska while ACA 2025 was underway devastated permanent settlements that had been placed in locations never traditionally used by Indigenous communities during that time of the year. This example illustrated the consequences of planning that ignores Indigenous Knowledge. This point is relevant not just for emergency response but for long-term settlement, infrastructure, and climate adaptation strategies.

While militarization and total defence frameworks are gaining prominence, the success and legitimacy of these frameworks depend on integrating municipal capacity, Indigenous rights, scientific knowledge, social well-being, and community-led preparedness. Having an integrated vision of defence and security expands the need to consider multiple diverse perspectives, especially if notions of community resilience are going to be discussed in parallel to the need for new defence capabilities in the Arctic.

2. Arctic Governance and Regional Norms continue to be crucial

Despite the intensification of military and geopolitical pressures, and in some cases because of it, the Arctic's regional norms of cooperation, diplomacy, scientific collaboration, Indigenous leadership, and inclusive governance continued to be raised up as important to maintain peace in the region. These norms surfaced repeatedly across sessions focused on climate governance, sovereignty, food systems, youth engagement, and municipal-level collaboration.

Notions of Sovereignty and Diverse Knowledge Systems

The *Indigenous Peoples' Sovereignty in the Arctic* session provided examples of how regional governance norms in the Arctic are rooted in community relationships, Indigenous Knowledge, and self-determination. These interventions reinforced that Arctic governance is not only about states. It must also be anchored in Indigenous Knowledge, sovereignty, and community-led decision-making – factors that have contributed to the success of Arctic governance over the last three decades.

Edward Alexander (Gwich'in Council International) explained that Gwich'in sovereignty is based on “ways of life and being,” with governance expressed through relationships with the land and community and not through Western territorial boundaries. The absence of a word for “border” in the Gwich'in language reflects this worldview. Jessica Veldstra (Aleut International Association) highlighted the importance of the cross-boundary nature of Aleut identity and governance, with 13 tribes spanning multiple states but maintaining shared cultural and political coherence. Gunn-Britt Retter (Saami Council) described the 2024 Saami data principles, created to ensure Indigenous control over data collection, use, and disposal. These principles were presented as essential protections against extractive research practices grounded in colonial history. Doreen Leavitt (Inuit Circumpolar Council) underscored that Inuit rights remain constant across Inuit Nunangat even as national jurisdictions differ: “nothing about us without us” reflects both a rights-based and governance-based principle.

Regional governance norms also depend on scientific cooperation and ethical research practices. Across the sessions on security, climate discussions, and sovereignty, speakers reiterated that research must respect FPIC, involve co-created research agendas, ensure community ownership of data, and respect for Indigenous Knowledge as a scientific and cultural system. The threat of datasets being lost, rising anti-science sentiment, and reduced access to government-controlled information in the US and Russia was framed as a governance risk because Arctic decision-making relies on accurate, longitudinal, and community-grounded evidence.

During the *Fulbright* session, Sappho Gilbert highlighted challenges of framing various issues as “security” issues, focusing on the notion of “food security” and suggesting instead that notions of food *sovereignty* would be more effective for shaping meaningful policy. Sappho described food *sovereignty* as the ability of communities to choose their food systems based on cultural identity, health, and local priorities. From this perspective, food is tied to cultural continuity, healthy calories cannot be separated from socio-economic conditions, and communities must lead in defining and operationalizing food sovereignty. This aligns with longstanding Arctic governance principles emphasizing Indigenous self-determination, well-being, and the integration of cultural perspectives into policy.

The *Strengthening Youth-Led Engagement across the Arctic Council* further reinforced regional norms and importance of inclusion and intergenerational governance. Youth participants stressed that they are too often engaged only after programs are designed, limiting genuine influence. They called for early and effective participation; mentorship and capacity building; opportunities to co-design initiatives; and integration of IK in leadership development. A key takeaway from this session was the perspective that legitimate governance depends on involving current and future generations who will inherit ongoing climate, sovereignty, and security challenges. The mechanisms at play within Arctic governance are increasing opportunities for this, but more can be done to improve the integration of youth voices.

Concluding Thoughts

Despite a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment and growing pressure to prioritize military readiness in the Arctic, long-standing regional norms including cooperation, Indigenous leadership, ethical principles, and climate-centered policymaking continue to anchor policy discussions across the region. Because these norms are so deeply embedded in Arctic governance, they may also help shape and positively influence military-related decision-making that affects the homelands of Arctic Indigenous Peoples. In this context, however, discussions at ACA 2025 pointed to an important emerging trend policymakers should consider: Arctic security and defence policies and Arctic governance organizations are increasingly overlapping through their shared emphasis on community resilience and preparedness.

While the Arctic Council is barred from engaging on anything related to military security by its mandate, many of the environmental, social, and economic issues it has long addressed – such as those increasingly ordered under notions of food security, environmental security, and human security – are now being reframed within notions of total security and preparedness strategies. This could pose challenges for Arctic governance organizations and their members as community capacity, climate data, and socio-economic stability increasingly become part of defence thinking – domains often covered by Arctic Council working groups, for example. Could this cause the work of the Council to be perceived as contributing to defence planning if everything begins to fall under notions of “total security,” even if unintentionally or indirectly? Although this remains unlikely, it does raise important considerations.

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The move towards integrating everyday societal challenges into military planning – including through promoting “dual-use” infrastructure – poses both conceptual and institutional challenges Arctic states and Indigenous Peoples must consider. Military planning and cooperative governance serve different purposes, and treating community issues in the Arctic as military concerns risks reducing them to something they may not actually be. After all, military planning aims to prevent conflict through deterrence, while governance mechanisms such as the Arctic Council exist to build trust, cooperation, and lasting peace. It is important that Arctic states, rightsholders, and stakeholders ask the question: will blending military logic with civilian and Indigenous-led systems make genuine community resilience possible?