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## Arctic Frontiers 2026: Turn of the Tide

### Reading the Arctic Through a Shifting Analogy

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The annual Arctic Frontiers conference in Tromsø took place at a pivotal moment. As delegates arrived for its 20th iteration, many were still catching their breath from what had been a chaotic, anxiety-inducing start to 2026. In the weeks leading up to the conference, Greenland and the broader Arctic were in the spotlight, as escalatory rhetoric, explicit threats of invasion, and an unprecedented level of security posturing collided in ways that further put into question the long-standing assumptions about regional stability. Conversations in the hallways of the venue did not carry the levity characteristic of Arctic conferences; it felt as though at this moment, something fundamental had shifted. Surely, the theme of this year's conference, "Turn of the Tide," had been conceptualized long before the drama of January 2026. Yet over the course of the week, it seemed almost prophetic. Many panelists and presenters offered multiple interpretations of what this analogy might mean, each shaped by a different political or environmental vantage point.

The rupture to which Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney referred in his speech a few weeks earlier served as a backdrop to many of these discussions. The first panel that I attended, entitled "If you're not at the table, you're on the menu: How should Norway and the EU navigate the Arctic?" began forebodingly and quickly expanded far beyond Norway, the EU, or even the Arctic itself. One of the panelists, Klaus Dodds from Middlesex University, described the current state of geopolitics not as a gradual shift but as "blunt force trauma," urging the Nordics and Canada to take a "long hard look at who your friends are." These were bold assertions that shaped not only the tenor of the room, but the tenor of the days ahead.

The "rupture" alluded to by Carney underscores a significant shift in the international system. It highlights how the long-standing foreign policy approaches of middle powers such as Canada or many European states, ones grounded in a rules-based international order, have encountered a profound impasse as major powers increasingly revert to the pursuit of distinct spheres of influence. This development reflects a broader transformation in the international system: a movement away from liberal, rules-based multilateralism toward a more competitive order defined by great-power rivalry and the reassertion of spheres of influence. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Arctic, where the influence of Russia and the United States remains inescapable, even as China seeks to expand and consolidate its own interests in the region. As Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv from

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UiT: The Arctic University of Norway put it, with these old spheres of influence re-emerging, Russia consolidates its sphere while the United States reinforces its own, leaving smaller Arctic states, including the Nordics and Canada, to navigate the narrowing space in between. In this framing, the Arctic is no longer insulated from great-power rivalry but has instead become one of its clearest expressions: a place where the tide is not merely turning, but being actively redirected.

A tide, after all, is predictable. It is a constant in coastal communities, a cyclical natural phenomenon that one must consider when making plans. Some speakers sought to ground attendees in this fact. For example, the President of Norway's Sami Parliament, Silje Karine Muotka, framed present tensions as part of a longer arc in Arctic history, one shaped by resource interest, sovereignty claims, and strategic competition. Using this analogy, what we are witnessing today is not unprecedented upheaval but merely another phase in a centuries-long rhythm where the tide recedes and tide returns. Indigenous peoples adapt, as do states. Institutions recalibrate. The Arctic remains governed by patterns that, while sometimes dramatic, are ultimately knowable to those who follow them.

For most attendees and speakers, what had unfolded in recent weeks did not feel cyclical at all. Rather than a predictable turn in a long rhythm, the moment suggested a rogue wave – a compression of pressures that had been building beneath the surface for years. Public declarations, emergency meetings, and diplomatic visits were only the visible manifestations of deeper forces: economic realignments, intensifying military competition, straining of long-held alliances, climate-driven accessibility, and mounting domestic political pressures within Arctic and non-Arctic states alike. What changed was not merely the tone of discussion, but the recognition that many of these forces will now be enduring features of Arctic politics.

There were also discussions that invoked the analogy of tidal ebbs and flows, pointing to how moments of cooperation and collaboration are followed by retreat and retrenchment. Arctic governance has long followed this strategy, requiring the delicate balance of seemingly competing interests: scientific collaboration alongside strategic caution; environmental stewardship alongside resource development. In this sense, fluctuation is not new. In the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, there have been brief glimmers of hope that the Arctic community might find ways (in the long run) to compartmentalize conflict and preserve channels of cooperation. This is proof that shared geography and shared vulnerability could still bind states together, and that the present rupture might one day be remedied. What feels different now, however, is not fluctuation itself, but the erosion of the stabilizing mechanisms that once contained it. The devastation wrought by Russia's war now combined with the United States' turn toward unilateralism, executive-driven policymaking, cuts to climate science funding, and retreat from multilateral climate commitments has made a stable Arctic far more difficult to envision. Tensions that once seemed manageable within a cooperative framework now risk solidifying into sustained structural rivalry, eroding a region long regarded as a model of pragmatic collaboration. Developments over the past half decade have led many to question whether the Arctic can still function as a space for progressive governance, or whether it is increasingly defined by geopolitical contestation.

As I listened to these tidal interpretations throughout the week, some emphasizing historical rhythm and others pointing to accelerating rivalry, a more disquieting possibility emerged. A red tide, unlike the predictable rising

and receding of the sea, signals toxicity; the death of ecosystems, relationships, economies, and communities. In the Arctic context, an intensification of geopolitical competition risks producing a similar effect where strategic rivalry displaces the region's long-standing default of cooperation and where corrosive mistrust begins to erode the norms of dialogue and collaboration painstakingly cultivated over decades through institutions such as the Arctic Council. The damage would not be easily reversed, lingering long after the red tide has passed.

This concern was reinforced during the conference's "Big Picture" session, *Arctic State of Affairs*, where physical geographer Professor Åsa Rennermalm spoke impassioned about the degradation of scientific funding in the United States and the conscious political efforts to cast doubt on established climate findings. Her remarks highlighted not only the accelerating reality of ice sheet melt, but also a widening leadership vacuum among the world's largest powers in addressing these changes. In this light, the metaphor of a red tide becomes less rhetorical and much more symptomatic: the Arctic faces the dual risk of ecological transformation and institutional corrosion, each reinforcing the other. What appears as a geopolitical shift may, if left unchecked, alter both the physical environment and the cooperative governance that has thus far distinguished the Arctic region.

As Arctic Frontiers carried on, I found myself returning time and time again to the conference's theme. While the theme of turning tides does lend itself well to messages that focus on the current climate of uncertainty, a turning tide can also signal renewal and the possibility of recalibration. One example of this were the repeated references throughout the week to the importance of strengthened Nordic-Canadian ties. When Norway's Prime Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, jokingly remarked that "Canada is an honorary Nordic" in his early morning keynote address, the line drew laughter from the crowd, but it also reflected a recent attitude shift. After all, there has been a pattern of increased political visits and engagements between Canada and the Nordic states, culminating in the opening of Canada's consulate in Nuuk, Greenland the day after Arctic Frontiers wrapped up. The opening of the consulate is just one example of an attempt to recalibrate state relationships in the Arctic – and a signal that partnerships among like-minded states may yet prove to be a steadying force, both in the region and globally.

However, it remains to be seen whether strengthened partnerships among like-minded states can stabilize this transition. The collaboration and cooperation built over decades, grounded in scientific exchange, multilateral dialogue, and a shared recognition of regional interdependence, is now being stress-tested in ways few participants had previously imagined. What is clear is that the governance model that long distinguished the Arctic is being reshaped by forces that extend far beyond the region itself. The durability of its institutions will determine whether this "turn of the tide" produces recalibration or lasting institutional corrosion.