POLICY BRIEF

NAADSN
North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network

naadsn.ca

January 28, 2026

Arctic Resilience Warnings for Canada and NATO

Andrea Charron, Ph.D.
NAADSN Co-Lead

Abbas Qaidari wrote a thought-provoking piece in *Open Canada* in October 2025 arguing that Canada's future Arctic sovereignty will depend on its ability to withstand and adapt to disruption. The answer, he suggested, is resilience. The term itself comes from the Latin *resilier* — "to rebound" — and has long been used by material engineers, climate scientists, public health specialists, and community researchers (McAslan, 2010). Militaries have now embraced the term as well, but I offer several warnings for the Canadian Armed Forces and NATO.

First, resilience vocabulary often clashes with military precision planning and tightly scripted concepts of operations.

Second, NATO and military institutions frequently speak of resilience as if it were a tool to deploy or a platform to install to "fix" a deficit.

Third, this framing frequently lacks local context.

Vocabularly and Culture

As Carney noted in his Davos speech, disruption is no longer hypothetical—it is here. Mitigating disruption, whether from climate change, geopolitics, or grey-zone activity, requires anticipation, adaptation, study and evaluation, recovery, and transformation. In a defence context, the language must shift. Instead of barricading, fortifying, or even deterring threats, the new lexicon centres on flexibility, elasticity, redundancy, and improvisation. For governments built on processes, standard operating procedures, concepts of operations, and carefully planned courses of action, this demands a significant change in vocabulary and mindset. It is like preparing for a scripted play only to find yourself in an improvisational performance: success depends not on perfect execution, but on the ability to ad-lib, pivot, and maintain momentum. Militaries can improvise—Search and Rescue operations and Special Forces prove that—but improvisation is not the norm, and often for good reasons.

A Deficit to Fix

The defence and security world also tends to treat resilience as a deficit that can be remedied. NATO's seven baseline requirements (2024) exemplify this orientation:
i) continuity of government,
ii) resilient energy supply,
iii) the ability to manage uncontrolled movement of people,
iv) resilient food and water resources,
v) resilience to mass casualties,
vi) robust civil communications systems, and
vii) resilient transportation systems.

The baselines assume the infrastructure is fairly robust before the need to "rebound". The list is designed to ensure states under prolonged attack can fight on. Key infrastructure, often in the south, are the focus for protection given their location near large population centres. As Canada, in particular, projects power and resupplies to the North from the South, the North may be left particularly vulnerable and underserved. For example, if Canada is under sustained attack, will the military and Canadian Coast Guard have the capacity to resupply the North with fuel for example?

In the Arctic, deficits are constants. Communities prioritize the strengths and knowledge they already possess. Militaries and security scholars should recognize this two-sided coin; it is akin to the longstanding debate (Diehl 2016) over defining peace. Is it simply the absence of war (or negative peace) or is peace more involved requiring a focus on reconciliation, justice, sustainable development and equity, i.e., positive peace? While the former is ensured by militaries, the latter is the responsibility of civilian agencies and societies.

Related to this deficit-based framing is the assumption that resilience means the ability to respond to disruptive influences while maintaining form and function. That definition works when disruptions are discrete, one-off events. But in the Arctic, disruption is continuous—there is rarely a stable baseline against which to measure change. Yet militaries and governments often view resilience as a *result* rather than a *process*, implying it can be delivered externally through the right infrastructure, the right concept of operations, or the right exercise. This view is rooted in a southern conception of resilience that does not align with Arctic realities.

Local Context

The final challenge for federal governments and military headquarters is their physical and conceptual distance from how disruption manifests in the North. The widespread adoption of the term "resilience" to describe human experience in the Arctic has not always resonated with communities. In a study of perspectives on resilience across seven of the eight Arctic countries (Cueva et al, 2021), participants critiqued the term and emphasized different components of thriving communities. Ceuva et. al (2021) capturing discussions across the Circumpolar Region found that many individuals outright rejected the label "resilience," feeling it did not reflect their worldview or lived experience.

So how might we address the warnings?

Addressing the Warnings: Three Practical Shifts for Arctic Resilience

We won't get resilience in the Arctic by adding more choreography to plans. In a place where disruption is constant, resilience has to be practiced as flexibility, redundancy, and improvisation on purpose, not by accident. That requires three shifts:

1) From rigid planning to an adaptive operating system (AOS)

Militaries live by SOPs, CONOPS and COAs; "ad hoc" responsiveness is uncomfortable and often under-authorized.

What to do:

- Pre-delegate authorities for Arctic contingencies (mission-command style) so leaders can pivot within defined left/right limits without waiting on Ottawa.
- Stand up small, joint "adaptive planning cells" in each Northern region (with provincial/territorial and Indigenous participation) that maintain live, revisable playbooks for weather, comms loss, fuel disruptions, SAR surges, grey-zone incursions.
- Train improvisation deliberately: convert one major annual exercise into a no-notice, "script-break" field problem with injects that invalidate plans and force-controlled adaptation (e.g., communications blackout, runway denial, medical surge).
- Modular logistics by default: pre-position interoperable, swappable kits (power, comms, medical, mobility) that multiple departments can draw on without bespoke requisitions.
- Red-team and wargame failure: practise graceful degradation (how to succeed at 60% capacity) and planned rerouting rather than "hold until collapse".

2) From deficit-fixing to whole-of-society, strengths-based resilience.

Treating resilience as a "gap" to be filled by a military tool or platform (e.g., NATO's baseline requirements) misses Arctic realities and can even deplete local resources.

What to do:

- Adopt a "comprehensive security" model for the North (a version of Nordic total defence): shared planning with provinces/territories, Indigenous governments, municipalities, utilities, co-ops, telecoms and NGOs.
- Start with existing strengths (Ranger knowledge, local co-ops, hunters' networks, land-based skills, community radio) and fund those as capabilities, not as "nice-to-haves."
- Resource neutrality as doctrine: if a federal/military activity consumes scarce community fuel, bandwidth or runway slots, it must backfill or offset (deliver fuel, fix the runway, lay temporary comms) as part of the task.
- Multipurpose investments first: microgrids, weatherized shelters, Starlink/LEO redundancy, community hangars, and year-round airstrips that serve both residents and operations.
- Measure resilience as a *process*, not a score: track time to restore essential services, time to reroute supply, percentage of local procurement, and community-defined wellbeing markers after disruptions.

3) From 'southern resilience' to community-led, place-based practice.

Distance from decision-makers and a southern framing of resilience that does not resonate in the North.

What to do:

- Ranger 2.0: expand recruiting, compensation, equipment and decision-making roles; embed Community Resilience Liaisons (Ranger NCO + local civil lead) who co-own plans and exercises.
- Co-create "Northern Resilience Compacts" with each host community: a short, living MOU covering expectations for exercises/ops, environmental safeguards, data stewardship, backfill commitments, and benefits (training, infrastructure, scholarships).
- Institutionalize "Two-Eyed Seeing" (Indigenous knowledge + Western science) in planning and after-action reviews; pay knowledge-holders as experts, not volunteers.
- Predictable, low-impact exercise calendar co-designed with communities to minimize wildlife, cultural and seasonal disruption—and to maximize local employment and training.

- Environmental and cultural safeguards as hard gates: fuel spill prevention/response, waste backhaul, noise windows, wildlife corridors, and rapid remediation baked into every CONOPS.

The good news is that Nordic states and Canada are implementing some of these plans – or at least variations. The trick will be to make them routine –afterall, militaries live on routine.

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