



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **Climate Change and Arctic Security**

**By Jacob Ouimet**  
December 2021

# CONFERENCE REPORT

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## CLIMATE CHANGE AND ARCTIC SECURITY

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**Will Greaves** – *Assistant Professor of International Relations at the University of Victoria, Coordinator of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network.*

**Heather Exner-Pirot** – *Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and the Wilson Centre.*

**QUESTION:** *What are the important effects of climate change and how do they intersect with Canadian Arctic security concerns? More specifically, what risks do melting icecaps and permafrost bring to Canada?*

*Will Greaves*

- Arctic threats are their own distinct category, and melting icecaps and permafrost represent the two most significant physical changes to the Canadian Arctic, which comprises 20 per cent of Canada's landmass. Climate change will lead to a reduction in sea ice coverage.
- The threats associated with these changes are unavoidable, and they will worsen over time regardless of global climate mitigation efforts. These threats can be overcome and mitigated, but at a high cost.
- Melting Icecaps have human and state security risks to which Canada lacks the capacity to effectively respond:
  - Human security as it relates to northerners, specifically indigenous populations
    - Negatively impacts economic and cultural practices such as hunting
    - Limited mobility between communities
    - Decline in housing stability (physically and economically)
    - Negatively impacts transportation of vital goods such as food and medical supplies and infrastructure like sewage, roads, and runways
  - State security
    - Reduction in sea ice coverage harms navigability in the High Arctic ocean
    - Allows for increased activity of foreign actors and unauthorized transits through Northwest Passage (NWP) and other territorial waters
    - Greater volume of vessels may navigate the arctic increases the potential for nautical and maritime disasters and increase human and ecological dangers



## *Heather Exner-Pirot*

- The Arctic region presents a model of good cooperation between Arctic states, with the Arctic Council and Arctic Coast Guard Forum being excellent examples. This includes the potential for increased cooperation with Russia who faces similar challenges and opportunities:
  - Russia wants regional stability; they don't want to make arctic into a region of conflict
  - The 2018 Arctic fishing moratorium was agreed upon by Canada and other Arctic states, including Russia
  - Emergency and oil spill response are other areas of commonality where cooperation makes sense
- Arctic has been historically peaceful and climate change is unlikely to disrupt arctic peace in the next 10 to 15 years
- The Arctic is not becoming more “economically competitive”:
  - States are not fighting over arctic oil: Russia has their own supply, and China has been buyers for their own natural gas
  - North American Arctic oil not necessarily desirable: we are all exporters
  - It is expensive to develop Arctic resources, they do not represent the best investment opportunities
  - They are not a target by other states: there is a 10-year development process, and they are a vulnerable investment
- The NWP is substandard for transit and shipping opportunities: the Canadian Arctic Archipelago will always be covered in ice during the winter, it is mostly dark for 6 months of the year, and floating ice chunks make shipping harder and more dangerous. The Bering Strait is used more than the NWP.
- There is not a lot of reason for conflict: there is more to cooperate on than to fight over.



**QUESTION:** *How would you assess the state of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, given increased maritime activity and insufficient levels of Canadian assets in the region? How do Canadian partners view our sovereignty claims, particularly when it comes to indigenous issues?*

*Heather Exner-Pirot*

- Sovereignty is not a top five problem for Canadian Arctic security: there are no other actors claiming Canadian Arctic Archipelago.
- All Arctic sovereignty issues are maritime boundaries disputes, such as the ones between Alaska and the Northwest Territories, or the Narrow Strait with Denmark.
- There are Exclusive Economic Zone disputes regarding how far they expand beyond the continental shelf.
- The extended continental shelf is another issue, but not a pressing one. The debate is about the territory beyond 200 miles from Canadian territory. It is mostly focused on deep seabed mining, which Canada is far from being able to currently accomplish; there is little reason to resolve this issue quickly.
- The Northwest Passage is a more contentious issue, but with Canada having an agreement to disagree with the United States for a long time, the dispute has been manageable. The issue is not over resources, but over freedom of navigation through the NWP. But there is not a great amount at stake overall with the NWP.

*Will Greaves*

- Canada is unique among Arctic states because of how it frames Arctic issues as ones of sovereignty, especially when many arctic obstacles are not questions of sovereignty in the first place.
- The labelling issues of Arctic policy as one of sovereignty can inflame international disagreements, especially with Canada's allies. Canada's largest disagreements are with close allies such as the United States, so it is more expedient to approach issues of Arctic sovereignty as bilateral disputes with the relevant partners.
- Canada needs to be more proactive to solve disputes with Western arctic allies, e.g., with Denmark over Hans Island and with the U.S. over the Beaufort Sea. Neither of these would prejudice NWP disputes, which is more of an international issue than an Arctic issue, such as mobility issues for the U.S. navy. As such, many Arctic issues fall under the auspices of foreign policy.



**QUESTION:** *How should Canada adjust to the imperatives of domain awareness, accessibility, and continental defence concerns, while keeping the region of low-tension zone and incorporating a whole of government approach?*

*Will Greaves*

- Many of the issues ascribed to Canadian Arctic security are issues that occur in, or are relevant to the circumpolar Arctic, such as the High Arctic Ocean and international waters. These are not part of Canadian territory and are not Canada's responsibility to deny access to others.
- When it comes to Canadian territory, the Canadian government does authorize and/or reject Chinese assets. This includes shipping or investment prospects, some of which the government has rejected.
- Creating stronger relations with Western Arctic Allies is the best way to deal with broader Arctic issues that fall outside Canadian arctic territory. This includes Russia, where the Arctic is an easy theatre to engage with them in. However, we should not lump Russia in with other arctic states due to the large differences in our governmental and economic systems.

*Heather Exner-Pirot*

- Canada needs stewardship control over our Arctic. Working with Canadian Rangers is a good idea for monitoring the area, but they need the right equipment.
- Canada is comparatively effective at operating in the Arctic, but there are various strategic components: Arctic development needs to convey that these measures are not for offensive purposes, which is where the various forums can be useful (i.e., the Coast Guard Forum). There has been effective defence diplomacy through these venues in the past, and climate change has not created different strategic conditions.
- The U.S. does not have enough icebreakers for total Arctic control, while Russia has the most arctic expertise, due to having more population in its northern regions than the entirety of the Canadian population, the Arctic representing 25 per cent of their GDP (vs. less than 1 per cent for Canada) – the Arctic is their “Gulf Coast,” economically and militarily.
- The Northern Sea route is superior for China over the NWP in every way, garnering the moniker of the Polar silk road. But China, with two icebreakers, no Arctic exercises, and no Arctic expertise, is not an Arctic power.



**QUESTION:** *Where should the Department of Defence and Canadian Forces make additional investments in, or behavioural changes to handle the non-strategic climate related imperatives?*

*Will Greaves*

- Chinese activity is not threatening or disruptive to the Canadian Arctic. China likely wants to keep the stability for economic reasons. The primary concern about Chinese arctic activities is the deepening of relations with Russia.
- Canada needs dual-use equipment for military and civilian purposes. Offshore patrol vessels are an example. However, the eight new vessels are not sufficient to meet Canada's needs.
- Canada requires remote sensing technologies because of the size and sparseness of the arctic region, which includes UAVs. This technology doesn't need to be military hardware, but it should invest in human capacity. The technology should be multipurpose: for example, being able to monitor for oil spills, search and rescue, unauthorized entry, ice conditions, etc.
- There are large gaps in civilian Arctic infrastructure (e.g., the Iqaluit drinking water situation), and there are three areas of infrastructure investment where there is massive demand; efforts will cost billions of dollars.
  - Power generation (with alternatives to diesel fuel and generator are needed)
  - Clean water, as part of the obligations to Indigenous peoples by the Canadian government
  - Housing, which is contingent on the other two areas
- These are never going to be private sector initiatives. The government must be the main drivers behind them, despite prohibitive costs and low return on investment due to local populations being sparse and a lack of political will.
- These efforts remain necessary: the current system is not sustainable and will create human security concerns.

## ► About the Author

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**Jacob Ouimet** is a second-year master's student in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science from Ryerson University in 2017 where he discovered his interests in Canadian foreign policy, including Arctic policy and defence. His time abroad in Israel has helped strengthen his interest in policy working for a member of the Israeli parliament, the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, and the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs. His thesis topic explores the capacity of Canadian government to operate in the Arctic and the current accessibility of the region. As a Research Assistant working for NAADSN, Jacob is working with Dr. Whitney Lackenbauer and Dr. Shannon Nash on the scope of responsibility that the Department of National Defence/Canadian Armed Forces should assume in the Arctic and analysis of key points from the Defence Policy Review consultations in 2016.



## ► Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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