

Canada, circumpolar security, & the Arctic Council

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As Canada assumes the chair of the Arctic Council for the second time in May 2013, many observers have reflected on the prospects for Canada's circumpolar leadership over the coming two years. Though the Arctic is experiencing tremendous political, economic, social, and ecological transformation, expectations of Canada's chairmanship are muted. Although Canada is a key founding member of the Council, and a major past proponent of its core mandate to promote environmental sustainability and Indigenous participation in regional governance, Arctic observers have expressed scepticism that Canada's term as chair will result in effective regional policy coordination, or the kind of leadership that is likely needed for progress on a variety of challenging Arctic issues.

On one hand, the problem may be Canada: a federal Government preoccupied with domestic political challenges; a governing Conservative ethos sceptical of international institutions; a narrow socio-political construction of what 'the Arctic' means; and a steadfast vision of Northern natural resource extraction that threatens to undermine the founding purpose of the Arctic Council to monitor and preserve the fragile Arctic ecosystem, all inspire pessimism at the prospect of a positive Canadian term as chair. On the other hand, the problem may be the Arctic Council itself: limited by its mandate to 'soft' policy areas; lacking international legal personality or binding legal authority over its members; undermined by state efforts to operate outside its auspices, notably the emergence of the 'Arctic 5' as an ad hoc forum for regional discussions; and compromised by member-states reluctant to include new Observer states from beyond the polar region and restrict or control the role of Indigenous Permanent Participants, one could argue that such structural and political impediments make it a troubled vehicle for regional cooperation and policy coordination. Given widespread recent attention to, and contestation of, questions of 'security' in the circumpolar region — especially in light of the exclusion of "matters related to military security" from the Arctic Council's mandate¹ — what are the implications for circumpolar security of Canada's term as chair of the Arctic Council?

I suggest that Canada's chairmanship of the Arctic Council is likely to result in something of a paradox

for issues of regional security. Though the *Ottawa Declaration* prohibits it from considering issues of *military* security, the Arctic Council is already playing a role in circumpolar security through its contributions to planning and coordinating regional search and rescue (SAR) operations. In this respect, the door has already been opened for the Arctic Council to play a greater role in the management, coordination, and integration of the military policy and materiel required for the search and rescue activities of circumpolar states. Conversely, despite its crucial role in promoting Indigenous governance and advancing and coordinating scientific research of the Arctic, particularly with respect to the health and environmental impacts of pollution and climate change, under Canada's chairmanship the Council is unlikely to significantly contribute to the promotion of regional environmental, cultural, and human security.

Although Canada was a leader in the conceptual widening of security that occurred in the post-Cold War period, pursuing a holistic conception of regional security that prioritizes protection of the Arctic ecosystem, the health and wellbeing of Northerners, the cultural integrity of Arctic Indigenous peoples, and mitigating the impacts of human-caused climate change is incompatible with the Conservative vision of the North as a storehouse of hydrocarbon and mineral resources waiting to be exploited. Despite its widespread use in academia and international policymaking, the Harper Government has banned even the term 'human security' because of its partisan association with the previous governing Liberals. Thus, despite being nominally barred from doing so, the Arctic Council may increasingly contribute to a militarized understanding of Arctic security as it pertains to SAR. And despite the Council's potential to be a valuable forum for crafting a comprehensive approach to regional security, such a role is highly unlikely given the Canadian government's strident opposition to linking security and the environment because of the implications for its extractive resource policy agenda.

Since the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996, Arctic states and leaders have repeatedly emphasized that the Council does not 'do' security issues. Indeed, excluding security from the Council's mandate was a critical component in the initial deci-

sions of the United States and Russia to join, as neither state was prepared to compromise its sovereignty by surrendering decision-making power over core national security interests to a nascent international institution. Despite this, over its existence the Council has expanded its role until the present when, despite its nominal prohibition, it has assumed a key coordinating function in a policy realm that necessitates the deployment of military resources: search and rescue.

In recent years, SAR has emerged as one of the most important and dynamic policy areas in the Arctic region. Motivated by growth in maritime traffic as a result of melting summer sea ice and greater navigability of Arctic waters, as well as too-frequent aircraft accidents often resulting from limited or compromised infrastructure and challenging weather conditions, search and rescue has become an increasing concern for Canada and other Arctic states. Building on a recent history of SAR cooperation between Arctic states, notably between Russia and Norway in the Barents Sea, a Task Force on Arctic Search and Rescue was mandated by the Arctic Council's Tromsø Declaration in April 2009. The Task Force led to the May 2011 signing of the *Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic* during the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Nuuk, Greenland. The first binding agreement signed under the auspices of the Arctic Council, and the first binding legal instrument for the region entered into by all eight Arctic states, the Agreement mandates the parties to: share information about the search and rescue capabilities and positioning of each state party; provide each other with aid in cases where national capabilities are unable to adequately respond to a SAR situation; and conduct joint exercises to improve interoperability and facilitate greater cooperation between the military and civilian response agencies of each Arctic state. Though modest in its scope, upon its adoption the SAR Agreement was hailed as auguring a new era of Arctic regional cooperation, and forms one of the most substantive achievements of the Arctic Council to date.

In compliance with the Agreement, over 80 participants representing the militaries and SAR authorities of the Arctic states participated in the Arctic Council's first tabletop SAR exercise in Whitehorse in October 2011. The first live SAR exercise, "SAR-EX 2012", was held off the east coast of Greenland in September 2012, and involved military and civilian personnel, government officials, fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and maritime vessels from all Arctic states except Sweden and Finland. The emergency scenario, a sinking cruise ship, reflected the SAR challenges of a changing Arctic, and was par-

ticularly appropriate given the exponential increase in commercial cruise ship traffic in the Arctic region in the past decade. The collective emphasis on search and rescue marks an important milestone in Arctic cooperation, but may also suggest a broader shift in the role and scope of responsibility afforded the Arctic Council. As one analyst notes: "One area that was thought to be *verboden* was that of matters related to military security. However, given that the [SAR Agreement] necessitates the coordination of the states' military, coast guard, police, and transport services for rescue purposes, hard security may be entering into the agenda by stealth."²

During its upcoming term as chair, Canada is likely to maintain search and rescue as a high priority for the Council. Canada stands to benefit greatly from SAR cooperation given the massive size of its Arctic territory and its limited response capabilities. Moreover, effective SAR response has become an important part of demonstrating functional sovereignty over the Canadian Arctic, a recurring preoccupation for successive federal governments keen to bolster sovereignty claims in the face of perceived challenges to Canada's Arctic territory. Since 'sovereignty' functions as a general rhetorical substitute for 'security' within Canadian Arctic policy, and since SAR is playing an increasing role in underpinning Canada's Arctic sovereignty claims, the Arctic Council's coordination of SAR can be understood to contribute meaningfully to the security interests of the Canadian state. Political pressure to invest further in its SAR capabilities is emerging domestically as well, given the findings in a recent report by Canada's Auditor General. Though it concluded that Canada's current SAR capabilities were adequate, the report warned that "significant improvements are needed if [the Canadian Forces and Canadian Coast Guard] are to continue to adequately respond and provide the necessary personnel, equipment, and information systems to deliver SAR activities effectively."³ For these reasons, Canada is likely to remain a proponent of Arctic search and rescue cooperation, and the *de facto* expansion of the Arctic Council's mandate into areas traditionally associated with security that results.

The same is unlikely to be true for an expansion of the Arctic Council's activities into areas consistent with a widened, post-Cold War understanding of security, particularly the areas of environmental and human security. The conceptual widening of security has been a major scholarly and applied development in recent decades, amounting to a broad recognition that questions of 'security' should not be exclusively focused upon sovereign states and their interests, or upon the threat and use of military force. Instead, hu-

man beings are understood as experiencing in/security at different levels of aggregation — including the local, regional, national, and global levels — depending upon the nature of the threat, and from a variety of different sources, such as threats in the physical, economic, societal, and environmental sectors of human life. Though not without its critics, during the tenure of Liberal Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy Canada was a leading proponent of widening security under the so-called ‘human security agenda’, a policy framework that persisted well into the Conservative Government’s approach to, among other issues, ongoing Canadian involvement in the war in Afghanistan. At least on paper, Canada has long recognized that security extends within and across the boundaries of states, and encompasses an array of factors necessary for the maintenance and promotion of human wellbeing.

In the context of the Arctic, a widened view of security highlights the centrality of the natural environment, particularly the unique ecosystem upon which all human activity in the Arctic has been based. As this ecosystem transforms due to human-caused climate change, it necessarily impacts all aspects of life in the region. Changes such as increased lake temperatures, thawing permafrost, stress on plant and animal populations, melting glaciers and sea ice, and damage to essential infrastructure present significant and growing physical security hazards to individuals and communities. Researchers have identified at least nine ways in which climate change exacerbates hazards to human health in the Arctic and Inuit leaders, such as Sheila Watt-Cloutier, have confirmed that harsh and erratic weather conditions combined with “thin ice [are] claiming the lives of ... [Northern] hunters every year.” The warming environment is changing the landscape such that it threatens the physical integrity of communities, military and industrial installations, and vital infrastructure in vulnerable areas across the North. These hazards are already apparent in damage to critical infrastructure such as roads, airstrips, pipelines, and sewage systems as a result of melting permafrost and the ensuing destabilization of the very terrain upon which life in the Arctic has been built.

Environmental changes are also contributing to the economic and food insecurities of many Northerners. Country foods remain an important part of the regular diet for many Arctic Indigenous persons, with more than half of all meat and fish consumed coming from traditional harvesting. However, in a warming Arctic thinning sea ice, changing vegetation, invasive species, altered migration patterns for caribou herds, and increased variability and

unpredictability in weather and climate reduce the availability and accessibility of traditional foods. Reduced quality or corrupted food sources such as diseased fish, dried up berries, and unhealthy caribou have already been observed, but given the higher cost and lesser nutritional benefit of packaged foods in Northern communities, country foods are economically impossible for many Northerners to replace, forcing many to rely upon contaminated or compromised country foods. Declining quality and availability of country foods also contribute to the erosion of Indigenous cultural practices, since “to hunt, catch, and share these foods is the essence of Inuit culture. Thus, a decline in [country foods]. . . threatens not only the dietary requirements of the Inuit, but also their very way of life.”⁴ Seen in this light, the impacts of climate change suggest a complex web of current and emerging insecurities that represent profound short- and long-term challenges for the Arctic region and its inhabitants.

Yet despite its historical leadership in the area of human security, and in spite of the demonstrable human security implications of a changing Arctic environment, Canada’s leadership of the Arctic Council is unlikely to meaningfully address these issues. Indeed, it seems likely that Canada’s term as chair will undermine the Council’s role in spearheading scientific research into the effects of Arctic climate change, and will only encourage the expansion of the industrial and extractive processes driving those changes. The Arctic Council and its Working Groups have been leaders in the production of scientific research into the North and its people, with several of their reports and studies — most prominently the *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* and the *Arctic Human Development Report* — assuming the status of “touchstone documents” widely employed by policymakers, activists, and scholars around the world.⁵ Five out of the Council’s six Working Groups focus exclusively on issues related to the Arctic environment, and the Council’s initial founding built on the 1991 *Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy* designed to address regional environmental challenges in the wake of the Cold War. Since its inception, especially given the exclusion of military security from its formal mandate, the work of the Arctic Council has focused predominantly on understanding and assessing the changes to the transforming Arctic ecosystem.

Yet it is exactly this commitment to study and protect the Arctic environment that Canada has already signalled its intention to move away from during the next two years. When Canada’s Leona Aglukkaq took over as Chairperson during the Arctic Council’s Eighth Ministerial Meeting in Kiruna,



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Sweden in May 2013, she clearly indicated that the federal Government's Arctic vision places economic development, primarily non-renewable resource extraction, as its highest priority. This vision, recently outlined in detail by Minister Aglukkaq in the pages of *Northern Public Affairs* (Fall 2012), is premised upon the acceleration of private sector industrial activity in the region, including a greater role for corporations in Arctic governance, and the need for scientific research conducted by the Council to enable the commercialization of the circumpolar region. In various public statements, Minister Aglukkaq has been clear that the Council's scientific work must be made more relevant to private industrial and the Canadian Government's agenda of Arctic economic development, stating in an interview that "We talk of . . . Canada's North developing, the Arctic region of every country developing. But it's the private sector that's actually going to develop those regions, not scientists."⁶ One of the first actions taken by Canada as chair was announcing the establishment of a Circumpolar Business Forum that will allow major corporate actors a greater say in the development of Arctic resources, primarily the world's largest oil and gas companies focused upon the extraction of Arctic hydrocarbons. In Canada's Northern vision, the Council's historical focus upon preserving and understanding the Arctic environment through scientific inquiry has been clearly subordinated to the priority of using science to enable faster and greater access to the resource base in the Arctic region.

One of the central factors behind this shift is the fundamental tension that exists at the heart of Canada's current approach to the issue of human-caused climate change. Not limited solely to the Arctic, the contradictions and general incoherence of Canada's climate policy have been widely examined, and amount to simultaneously acknowledging the reality of climate change while rejecting meaningful reductions in Canada's greenhouse gas emissions or regulating practices such as hydrocarbon extraction

that are incompatible with resolving our present, and worsening, climate crisis. On numerous disparate policy issues, the Conservative Government is the most pro-resource extraction government in Canadian history, valuing the economic benefit of such activities seemingly no matter what the associated social, cultural, or ecological costs. It is this attitude that leads Canada to emphasize issues like oil spill prevention and response and the reduction of black carbon emissions as the central planks of its environmental agenda for the Arctic Council. While important policy issues, they are wholly disproportionate to the challenge climate change poses to the Arctic, especially insofar as they distract from the fact that developing greater oil and gas extraction in the Arctic will, by definition, only contribute to the problem of global reliance upon fossil fuels that is causing the Arctic to warm uncontrollably.

In this respect, the Government of Canada is markedly more pro-development than are organizations representing Indigenous peoples in the Arctic, though there is significant contestation over just how Arctic Indigenous peoples feel about industrial development in their homeland. Notwithstanding Minister Aglukkaq's claim that "people in the North want development. We want it!"⁷ dozens of Northern organizations, including some bodies representing Canadian Arctic Indigenous peoples, have signed the "Joint Statement of Indigenous Solidarity for Arctic Protection" calling for a moratorium on Arctic oil drilling. On the other hand, leading Inuit groups have roundly rejected this statement as an example of voice-appropriation by Southern-based NGOs that do not speak on their behalf.⁸ Inuit leaders point instead to the *Inuit Declaration on Resource Development Principles*, which reserves the right of Inuit to benefit from the development of natural resources on their traditional territories while stipulating that "Inuit and others — through their institutions and international instruments — have a shared responsibility to evaluate the risks and benefits of their ac-

tions through the prism of global environmental security.⁹⁹ The prospect of expanded Arctic resource development places Indigenous peoples in the unenviable position of demanding that they benefit from activities which they do not necessarily support, but which they insist must benefit Northerners if the industrial activity will inevitably occur as the Government appears determined to see happen.

Canada has identified as the theme of its chairmanship ‘development for the people of the North,’ and routinely emphasizes the desire of Northerners for development, and the symbolic meaning of Minister Aglukkaq being the first Indigenous person to chair the Arctic Council. Crucially, however, the Government’s emphasis upon Northern economic development as *the* definitive policy priority of Canada’s term as chair appears to be at odds with the views of many Northerners with respect to the very issues that constitute ‘Arctic security’. The first *Arctic Security Public Opinion Survey*, conducted in 2010, suggests that the Government’s view of resource development is not strongly shared among Northerners. When asked to list the most pressing Arctic issues, one third (33%) of Northern respondents listed the environment first, followed by housing and community infrastructure (9%), and the economy, jobs and employment (7%).¹⁰ Thus, by a ratio of 3:1 Northerners consider the environment to be the most important Arctic issue. When prompted with a list of various dimensions of ‘security’, environmental security was ranked as most important by large majorities of all Canadians, followed, in descending order, by social, economic, cultural/linguistic, and national security. Overall, 91% of Northerners considered environmental security to be important to their definition of security in the Canadian Arctic, compared to 78% who felt the same for economic security. Insofar as Northern Canadians think in terms of ‘Arctic security’, it seems clear that they place the Arctic environment equal to or above other considerations.

In view of all this, what then should we expect from Canada’s term as chair of the Arctic Council, and what are the implications for the Council’s role with respect to ‘Arctic security’? Upon examining the policy agenda of the Conservative Government and their stated goals for the Arctic Council the result appears to be somewhat paradoxical. In the area of search and rescue — a field that necessitates the deployment and coordination of military resources in situations of emergency response — the role of the Arctic Council is likely to expand, despite the formal exclusion of ‘military security’ from its mandate. With the signing and subsequent implementation of the 2011 Search and Rescue Agreement, Canada and the other Arctic states have committed

themselves to this expansion of the Council’s role into the realm of SAR, a development likely to be supported by recent criticism of Canada’s search and rescue capabilities from the Auditor General. As climate change opens the polar region to greater commercial maritime traffic at the same time that it makes weather patterns and ice flows less predictable, there is a clear need for coordination on SAR activities.

But Canada’s consideration for the security implications of climate change stops at addressing its effects, rather than tackling its causes. Canada’s vision of the Arctic’s future as a storehouse of resources to fuel the appetites of Southern economies is one that necessitates environmental damage. The commitment to hydrocarbon development in the North and elsewhere in Canada makes it highly unlikely that scientific research into the impacts of climate change in the Arctic will be among Canada’s priorities as chair. Loftier goals, such as engaging the Arctic Council as a forum for discussing mitigation and adaptation to climate change, seem even less likely. Canada’s vision of the Arctic is one where resource development and private sector investment trump all other considerations, and it is this vision that will underpin the next two years of Arctic Council business during Canada’s tenure as chair. When it comes to Arctic security, search and rescue may save many lives, but it will not be enough to save the Arctic or its inhabitants from the environmental and human insecurities caused by climate change. Ultimately, rather than build on its human security legacy, Canada’s determination to ignore the seriousness of climate change in pursuit of short-term riches seems likely to leave the Arctic a more insecure place for the people of the circumpolar region. ●

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Footnotes

1. *Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council*, para. 1(a) (Ottawa: Canada, 1996).
2. Andrea Charron, “Canada and the Arctic Council,” *International Journal* Vol. 67, No. 3 (2012): 774.
3. Peter Varga, “Auditor General of Canada urges upgrades to Northern search and rescue,” *Nunatsiaq Online* (May 7, 2013).
4. ACIA, *Impacts of a Warming Climate: Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 94.
5. Charron 771.
6. Randy Boswell, ‘Aglukkaq of the Arctic: Can federal minister set a vision for international council?’ *Montreal Gazette* (May 12, 2013).
7. Boswell 2013.
8. *Nunatsiaq News*, “Indigenous Statement Calls for Arctic Oil Development Moratorium,” *Nunatsiaq Online* (May 14, 2013).
9. ICC, *A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Resource Development Principles in Inuit Nunaat* (Nuuk: Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2011): s. 5.1
10. EKOS, *Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Security Public Opinion Survey* (Toronto: Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation