



CANADIAN SOVEREIGNTY IN THE ARCTIC

Date: November 22, 2021

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KEY EVENTS

On November 22, 2021, Dr. Whitney Lackenbauer, Professor and Canada Research Chair at Trent University, presented *Canadian-American Solutions to the Questions of Arctic Security* at the 2021 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question and answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic, the changing global threat environment, and the U.S.-Canada Arctic partnership.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic is rooted in agreements with Indigenous peoples. Concerns about Arctic sovereignty and U.S. encroachment have existed since Canada's founding, but the U.S. and Canada are premier partners in the Arctic. The changing global strategic environment means that North America is no longer a sanctuary. As such, Canada, the U.S., and our allies must cooperate to face emerging hybrid threats.

Question Period

Canadians need to discuss whether the Arctic is a place where Canada should be investing dedicated resources. Focusing too much on great power competition may be missing the point on security. Climate change is the existential security threat that humanity faces, especially those who live in the Arctic.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

The foundation of Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic is shaped through the various agreements, treaties, and other understandings between the Canadian government and Inuit, Métis, First Nations, and other Indigenous peoples. However, the Canadian state's uncertainty about sovereignty goes back to the country's founding in 1867 and has continued in cycles ever since. Concerns about U.S. encroachment on Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic arose during the Klondike Gold Rush through to World War II, with fears about increasing U.S. influence in the Arctic. Concerns were reignited during the Cold War, when the Canadian government began to visualize the Arctic as the shortest route for Soviet bombers to reach North America and recognized that the U.S. faced an existential threat and preemptive actions could have been detrimental to Canada. This idea that Canada needs to be concerned not only about adversaries but about its greatest ally, the U.S., in the Arctic continues to permeate Canadian thinking.

All of the impacts that climate change is now having in the Arctic, including the opening up of sea routes and new access to resources, is once again raising concerns about Canada's sovereignty. Dr. Lackenbauer argued that claims that Canada must be prepared to militarily defend territories as far as the seabed beyond 200 nautical miles in the Arctic from Russian, Chinese, and even U.S. encroachment are very alarmist and insecure. Furthermore, he noted that the U.S. and Canada are premier partners in the Arctic and have been for a long time through defense, scientific, and intelligence collaboration. It is important to recognize that this relationship with the U.S. in the Arctic is mutually beneficial. It should be supported and enhanced in the face of renewed global strategic competition that affects the Arctic.

Dr. Lackenbauer highlighted that the specific Arctic threats noted in Canada's most recent defense policy focus more on the safety and security end of the operational missions spectrum and less on the defensive end. This policy also acknowledges that collaboration with the U.S. is critical to develop new technologies to improve Canada's surveillance and control. Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework also highlights the importance of modernizing the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and renewing the North Warning System to ensure that Canada and the U.S. are jointly postured to defend themselves against any type of threats. Dr. Lackenbauer reiterated that Arctic threats are against North America and not just intrinsic threats to Canada or its sovereignty.

There is good reason to be concerned about threats passing through the Arctic, such as Russian and Chinese missiles and bombers and submarines fleets. However, Dr. Lackenbauer questions whether these are Arctic threats or whether these technologies are global strategic threats that should first be considered on that scale. Canada should be considering what are the threats to the Arctic itself and developing conceptualizations of these threats in the Arctic context. There is a need to look beyond conventional military threats and consider new hybrid threats from foreign adversaries that are below the threshold of armed conflict. This includes economic investment; influence operations in the cyber, information, and cognitive domains; and threats that originate within Canada, such as humanitarian and environmental issues and the economic future of Northerners.

It is important to remember that the North American continent is no longer a sanctuary. The global strategic environment has changed, and new capabilities threaten the North American homeland. Canada, the U.S., and other allies need to consider how NORAD modernization and new technologies in domain awareness, information dominance, and decision superiority align with the defense interests of the broader intelligence community. Canada cannot lose sight of deterrence and the fact that the North is changing and needs to be prepared to respond to emerging threats.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, Dr. Lackenbauer stated that Canadian defense, security, intelligence, and academic partners need to have a more deliberate conversation about whether or not the Arctic is a space where Canada wants to be investing dedicated resources, perhaps more than in other areas. And whether or not shouldering these defense burdens in the Arctic would be considered by the U.S. and other alliance partners as a meaningful and substantive contribution. Dr. Lackenbauer also noted that Canada should decide whether to take the lead in this area or to continue with a very broad defense approach. Canadian decision makers are still unclear as to whether the U.S. will give Canada enough credit if it invests heavily in the Arctic.

Focusing on great power competition and the new ‘Great Game,’ misses the point when talking about security, especially in the Arctic. It essentializes the state as the primary actor. The danger is that the existential crisis that humanity and people living in the Arctic face from climate change will be overlooked. Climate change is the primary driver behind a lot of the existing and future issues and requires collective action at the global level to solve. By framing security in a

purely military or political way we may be missing more important and challenging security issues to solve in societal and environmental sectors, which may be more important.

When asked what his perspective was on the impacts of the opening of the Northern Sea Route, Dr. Lackenbauer noted that it will influence several areas such as direction of investments, which are a key linking component to the Lion's share of Russia's Arctic strategy. Investments in dual-use infrastructure are of particular concern. The Northern Sea Route has been a long-standing aspiration for Russia, and the increase in international activity within its security sphere is not looked upon favorably.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- The foundation of Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic is shaped through the various agreements with Indigenous peoples.
- Climate change in the Arctic is once again raising concerns about Canada's sovereignty.
- Arctic threats are against North America and not just intrinsic threats to Canada or its sovereignty.
- Canada needs to look beyond conventional military threats and consider new hybrid threats from foreign adversaries that are below the threshold of armed conflict.
- The U.S. and Canada are premier partners in the Arctic and have been for a long time through defense, scientific, and intelligence collaboration.

Question Period

- Canadian defense, security, intelligence, and academic partners need to have a more deliberate conversation about whether or not the Arctic is a space where Canada wants to be investing dedicated resources.
- With the opening of the Northern Sea Route, Russia's investments in dual-use infrastructure are of particular concern.
- By framing security in a purely military way, we may be missing more important and challenging issues to solve in societal and environmental sectors.



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