

Editorial

The Arctic is Back¹

The Arctic is, again, a hot topic. The last time the Arctic received such media scrutiny was in 2007/2008, the UN's International Polar Year. Numerous scientific studies confirmed that the Arctic was the climatic canary in the coal mine and collective responsibilities outlined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) were adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007 (which Canada voted against initially). The "race" was on to "own" the Arctic, exploit resources and find transit routes via the North.² Many Arctic states were collecting data to recognize extended continental shelves. The Arctic Council had just celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2006, and a new Canadian Prime Minister vowed to make sustained and significant resource contributions to the Arctic.

The Arctic was considered to be an 'exceptional' region; geopolitical tensions, which were on display elsewhere, were seemingly absent in the Arctic. Indeed, the five Arctic coastal states pledged in 2008 via the Ilulissat Declaration to let the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) guide the resolution of any conflicts among them. Then the Arctic faded into the background and attention to it by successive Canadian governments was sporadic.

Fifteen years later and the Arctic has burst onto the news again, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine being a major catalyst. Despite the urgings by successive NORAD commanders that North America remains vulnerable to threats, Canada continued to delay serious spending on continental defence. In addition, inaction contributed to

the acceleration of Arctic warming, making it a formidable threat multiplier. Domestically, there is still the belief that there will be a race to resources and shorter routes but that boom has not materialized especially for the Northwest Passage. Slow progress in reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is compounded by the persistent lack of infrastructure investment in Canada's Arctic. The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is often called upon, as a result, for assistance as was on the case in October 2021 when the government of Nunavut requested CAF help to mitigate Iqaluit's tainted water supply while a remediation plan was developed.

This theme issue reflects the increased attention to the Arctic – from oil spill agreements to the role of the Canadian Coast Guard. Resource contributions by the government of Canada have been sluggish despite promises in successive Canadian Arctic policies. Take, for example, the Nanisivik deep water port. The project was launched under Prime Minister Stephen Harper to great fanfare in 2007, but it is still not fully operational. On the other hand, the Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPS) have begun to come online and HMCS *Harry DeWolf* circumnavigated North America in the summer of 2021, as recounted in this issue by Commander Corey Gleason.

The Arctic Council celebrated 25 years in September 2021 and the number of its Observers has increased from 25 in 2007 to 38 in 2021 indicating that more states and organizations want a seat at this forum which was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018, 2020 and 2022. The



Members of 4 Engineer Support Regiment fill the first water truck with potable water produced from the Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Unit that was established during Iqaluit's water contamination crisis in November 2021.

Credit: Master Corporal James M. Beady, Joint Task Force (North)

council, however, is now on hiatus given Russian aggression. The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf is reviewing state data submissions (Canada's submissions for the Atlantic and Arctic are still in the long queue of submissions) and a 16-year moratorium on commercial fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean came into force in June 2021 signed by many Arctic and non-Arctic states, including China. And yet the conflict in Ukraine might undo this international cooperation.

It is clear that the Arctic has the potential for both conflict and cooperation as illustrated by Andreas Østhagen in this issue in terms of Norway. The counsel of Whitney Lackenbauer is instructive. Rather than thinking of the Arctic as either a region of conflict or a zone of exceptional cooperation, we must think about threats to, through and in the Arctic.³ This has the advantage of bringing nuance to the debate. It is also important to evaluate the Arctic using many lenses, especially economic, diplomatic and military ones.

From the perspective of economics, Canada's prospects in the North are still anemic. A lack of adequate housing, air routes that are almost exclusively north-south rather than east-west to link Arctic hamlets, dependence on summer sea lift and high food prices are just a few of the challenges. COVID prevented tourism, one of the burgeoning economic drivers of the Canadian Arctic. However, there is still a promise that critical minerals located in the North may contribute to more traffic through Arctic routes. Entrepreneurship is alive and well, and certainly, the creative arts industry in Canada's Arctic has been an under-valued success story.

A Churchill-Murmansk sea link, an exciting prospect in 2007/2008, is all but dead for a variety of reasons including infrastructure challenges and a changing wheat industry, not to mention sanctions against Russia for the invasion of Ukraine. An oil and gas moratorium in the Canadian Arctic was an ecologically smart decision but opportunities to explore greener options are limited. Diesel remains the most reliable power source in Canada's Arctic, affecting the costs and emissions of any large-scale industrial projects.

It is Inuit industries that are filling infrastructure gaps. For example, CanArctic's SednaLink Cable has plans to run an underseas fibre optic cable from Labrador to Iqaluit which is in competition with the government of Nunavut's plans to install cable from Nuuk, Greenland.⁴ That there are choices and competition is ultimately good for Canada's Arctic.

Indigenous self-determination across Canada's Arctic continues to evolve. The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) – the not-for-profit organization which represents over



Representatives from all eight Arctic States, six Indigenous Permanent Participants, the Arctic Council's six Working Groups and over 30 Observers meet for the first time under Russian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council during the Senior Arctic Officials' meeting in December 2021 in Salekhard, Russia.

65,000 Inuit – commissioned a study to analyse vessel traffic in Canada's Northwest Passage as has the Arctic Council. The number of vessels and distances travelled are increasing, in particular vessels related to tourism, resupply, research and local fishery.⁵ According to Natan Obed, President of the ITK, who contributed to this issue of *CNR*, the Inuit and the Northwest Passage are inextricably linked and the Indigenous peoples of the North are becoming increasingly active and involved. Local communities are training more first responders including auxiliaries of the Canadian Coast Guard, and an Inuit-controlled corporation Nasittuq has just won the contract to maintain the North Warning System (NWS).⁶ The Northwest Territories has announced it will develop its own indigenously-based school curriculum to replace the current Alberta-based one, and the youth of the Arctic are increasingly finding their voices.⁷

From a diplomatic perspective, it is clear that the Arctic was never immune to global politics. The Arctic Council's twin mandates of environmental protection and sustainable development resulted in numerous agreements among the eight Arctic states and, importantly, afforded Arctic Indigenous peoples decision-making influence. On 3 March 2022, however, owing to Russia's "grave impediments to international cooperation," Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the United States declared that they were "temporarily pausing participation in all meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies."⁸ The Inuit Circumpolar Council supported such action while the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North declared its support for Russia's actions in Ukraine.⁹ This does not mean, however, that all forms of cooperation in the Arctic have ceased.

There are also many partnerships that deserve attention. For example, Canada and Greenland share jurisdiction over *Pikialasorsuaq*, a large polynya (area of year-round open water surrounded by sea-ice cover) located in northern Baffin Bay. In 2016, the Inuit Circumpolar Council established the *Pikialasorsuaq* Commission to recommend an Inuit strategy for safeguarding and monitoring the



HMCS Harry DeWolf is pictured next to the Nanisivik Naval Facility in this photo taken during the ship's 2021 deployment through the Northwest Passage.

polynya. One of the commission's recommendations is to designate it as a protected area and Inuit-managed zone to ensure that this area, one of the most biologically productive regions north of the Arctic Circle, continues to thrive.

The US military continues to send mixed messages about its attention to the Arctic. On the one hand, there has been a pivot by US military services toward the Arctic – at least on paper via their Arctic Strategies – and in 2022 there have already been many simultaneously run (but perhaps not coordinated) Arctic exercises.¹⁰ On the other hand, the latest Interim National Strategic Security Guidance issued by President Joe Biden in March 2021 made not one mention of the Arctic.¹¹ NATO too has been struggling with whether to have a common Arctic strategy and it is unclear if the NATO 2030 reflection process and updates to NATO's Strategic Concept will feature the Arctic despite publication of NATO's Regional Perspectives Report on the Arctic.¹²

Recent announcements by Defence Minister Anita Anand suggest that Canada's defence focus for its Arctic will be led by NORAD and efforts to modernize continental defence, including a rethink of current forward operating locations and a renewal of the aging NWS.¹³ The Canadian Space Agency's RADARSAT Constellation Mission is used by 12 Canadian agencies – including the CAF – to improve domain awareness which will be augmented by the Polar Epsilon 2 program to support enhanced Arctic and maritime surveillance, and over-the-horizon radar that will provide persistent surveillance of North America's northern approaches.

Attention is back on the Arctic in part because of Russia's action in Ukraine. What is needed, however, is sustained

and persistent attention with concomitant resources – and more bold thinking of the type we see from authors in this issue of *CNR*. The resilience and entrepreneurship of northerners and the behind-the-scenes 'getting on with it' also deserve attention.

Fifteen years from now, many of the same issues will remain. Sadly, the Canadian government's infrastructure advances in the Arctic will still be wanting if dual-use options aren't considered as part of continental defence funding. The Northwest Passage will remain a route more suited to resupply, tourism and local fishing rather than large trans-global cargo vessels. We hope a version of the Arctic Council will still be focused on environmental protection and sustainable development and debating new Observers. US attention will be pulled toward the Indo-Pacific region and references to the Arctic in its strategies will likely become fewer. And some promised Canadian Arctic defence-related acquisition will still be 'in the works.' But we must be optimistic – the Arctic is back, and the articles in this theme issue illustrate the ongoing interest in the North. 🇨🇦

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Notes

1. With thanks to Heather Exner-Pirot for comments on the draft. Any errors are the fault of the author exclusively.
2. Michael Byers, "Canada's Arctic Race with Russia," *Toronto Star*, 29 July 2007.
3. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Threats Through, To, and In the Arctic: A Framework for Analysis," North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN), 23 March 2021.
4. Jim Bell, "A New Undersea Fiber-optic Cable for Nunavut Competes against the Territorial Government's Plans," *Nunatsiaq News*, 18 January 2021.
5. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK)/PAME, "Arctic Council Nilliajut 2: Inuit Perspectives on the Northwest Passage Shipping and Marine Issues," 2017.
6. Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, "Background: North Warning System In-Service Support," 31 January 2022.
7. See Janet French, "Northwest Territories Studying Alternatives to Alberta School Curriculum," CBC, 9 March 2021. For example, youth from Tuktoyaktuk screened their film "Happening to Us" outlining their perspective on climate change at COP 22. See Maéva Gauthier, "Happening to Us: Amplifying Youth Voices from the Arctic," *Terralingua*, 30 July 2020.
8. Global Affairs Canada, "Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," 3 March 2022.
9. For the Inuit decision see "Statement from the Inuit Circumpolar Council Concerning the Arctic Council," 7 March 2022. For Russia, see Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, "Letter to the President of the Russian Federation, V.V. Putin," 1 March 2022. For a summary of events, see Andrew Bresnahan, "Arctic Diplomacy and War in Europe," North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 8 March 2022.
10. Every US military service now has an Arctic strategy which is remarkable when you consider they do not have strategies for any other region in the world. And, for example, NATO's Exercise Cold Response, NORAD's Noble Defender, the US exercises Arctic Edge, IceEx and Arctic Eagle-Patriot and Canada's *Operation Nanook-Nunalivut* either overlap or are within weeks of each other.
11. The White House, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," 3 March 2021.
12. NATO, "Arctic Regional Perspectives Report," 2021, actually mentions the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) for the first time in any NATO document since the Cold War. See p. 33, pt. 24.
13. Steven Chase and Robert Fife, "Canada to Unveil 'Robust Package' to Modernize NORAD, Defence Minister Anita Anand Says," *The Globe and Mail*, 11 March 2022.