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Canada's Arctic Initiative in the Geopolitical Crucible

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The problem of Canada's Arctic policy, or lack thereof, lies in its attachment and dependence to Western models of security and integration, and particularly to its traditional ally, the United States.

The last several years have seen an exponential rise in the interest and value of the Arctic among the countries which share it directly (and some that do not), to the degree that the geopolitical climate of the region now rivals the importance of its environmental one. At stake is not only control over large swathes of territory, but as some world leaders have astutely noted, access to rapidly opening trade routes and an abundance of untapped resources, including oil, natural gas and gold, made possible by melting Arctic sea ice.

U.S. **Secretary of State Mike Pompeo**'s comments at the Arctic Council meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland on May 6, 2019 emphasised many of these points and stressed the strategic interests of the United States in the Arctic region. These comments culminated in U.S. **President Donald Trump's** aborted visit to Denmark over a botched proposal that the United States buy the autonomous territory of Greenland. Though largely ridiculed in the international press, the move was aimed at curtailing substantial Chinese investments in the Arctic region. The China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) is bidding to construct Greenland's new airports, while mining and rare earth elements (REE) production giant Shenghe Resources controls nearly 13 percent of the Kuannersuit/Kvangefjeld REE mining project.

Together, these projects would significantly enhance China's position in the Arctic. By 2020, it is estimated that between 5 to 15 percent of China's trade value could pass through the Arctic; a feat made possible by China's close strategic partnership with Russia in the construction of a "Polar Silk Road", joining the Russian Northern Sea route with the broader Belt and Road Initiative. Russia, for its part, has confirmed its commitment to expanding its position in the Arctic region. In early 2019, **Vladimir Putin** announced an increase in Russian cargo ship traffic in northern shipping lanes by inviting investment in the Murmansk-Kamchatka Peninsula shipping route, and also reaffirmed on-going projects aimed at modernizing Russia's military capabilities.

On this highly competitive international playing field, Canada has emerged as a distant and marginal player at best. Though it might seem to the casual observer that Canada would be well-poised to maintain its interests in its own backyard, in truth the country has yet to find its starting position. Indeed, despite the fact that the Canadian Arctic covers 40 percent of Canada's territory, a recent House of Commons committee has poured doubt over that

country's ability to protect its Arctic sovereignty, citing an infrastructure deficit and insufficient foreign and defence policies. Canada's failure to make comparatively significant progress on this vital nation-building project has been compounded by a geopolitical position that has left the country wavering between isolation and dependence.

When Liberal Prime Minister, **Justin Trudeau** announced the government's new plan, the Arctic Policy Framework (APF) in December 2016 to replace the previous Conservative government's Northern Strategy, Canada's Arctic ambitions were set on a new course. The framework applies to a large swathe of Canada's north, including Yukon, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Inuit Nunangat, the Nunatsiavut region of Labrador, the territory of Nunavik in Quebec and northern Manitoba, especially the town of Churchill. Its aims can be broadly described as an attempt at regional devolution, allowing Indigenous Arctic communities greater input in creating diversified economies, protecting the environment and building new infrastructure, while keeping matters of defence, foreign policy and national interest within the purview of the federal government.

Since its announcement, the project has become more of a loose set of ideals rather than a consciously realized program, a fact that has not eluded domestic commentators. This unsubstantiated policy has continued well into 2019. On March 19, the government unveiled a new federal budget that contained several Arctic-specific investment promises totalling $700 million, mostly aimed at developing and supporting local communities. However, with a federal election just over a month away, it is unlikely that the outlined investment goals were anything more than an attempt to repair relations between the incumbent Liberal government and Indigenous communities that have soured since the SNC-Lavalin scandal.

More recently, on September 10, 2019, one day before the federal election campaign was officially inaugurated, the Liberal government reaffirmed its commitment to the APF, with all of its promises of health, economic and infrastructure development. However, skeptics have pointed out that all this really amounts to is more of the same, that the Canadian government is well aware of the challenges facing the Canadian Arctic, and that another reiteration of policy goals is insufficient without a substantial effort to seem them realized.

Even under circumstances whereby the Government of Canada would be able to realize the goals set out by the APF, it is unlikely that doing so would in any way enhance Canada's position in the region. The government's overemphasis on local development in the Arctic has largely eclipsed considerations of the broader, national interest. Crucial to the development of any serious Arctic policy is investment in civilian and military infrastructure – two areas that are seriously lacking. As it stands, Canada has only one road that connects the country to the Arctic Ocean, the unpaved Dempster Highway.

The country's only deep-water Arctic port, located in Churchill, Manitoba, is also of questionable viability. In May 2017, a flood rendered the port's vital railway services inoperable. Between 1997 and 2018, the U.S.-based transportation infrastructure holding company OmniTRAX was the owner of both the Hudson Bay Railway and the Port of Churchill. Citing the economic unfeasibility of repairs, the port and its rail facilities were sold by OmniTRAX to Arctic Gateway Group, a public-private consortium composed of AGT Food and Ingredients, Fairfax Financial Holdings, and Missinippi Rail Limited Partnership in August 2018. With such vital infrastructure in the hands of private, foreign interests, it is small wonder that Canada's footprint in the Arctic is virtually non-existent.

Canada has also fallen drastically behind in the acquisition of icebreakers. In May 2019, the

Canadian Coast Guard commissioned the CCGS *Captain Molly Kool*, a medium-class diesel-fueled icebreaker purchased in 2018. It was the first such vessel to be purchased in twenty-five years, and a thoroughly unimpressive one in a naval landscape increasingly dominated by large, nuclear-powered icebreakers, especially those used by Russia. To this, it can be added that Canada has no active military presence in the Arctic of any kind.

The failure of the Canadian government to make a mark in the Arctic region in material terms has been compounded by its deteriorating international position. Ideological differences between prime minister-cum-global citizen Justin Trudeau and the "America First" President Donald Trump no doubt cast a personal shadow over Canada-US relations, but the relationship has also suffered in real terms. The Canada–United States–Mexico Agreement (CUSMA), the new trilateral trade agreement meant to supersede the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), has ensured that Canada's economic prosperity will suffer at the cost of a net benefit to the United States, with agricultural and dairy industries expected to face the brunt of this decline. In specifically Arctic terms, Canada's "senior partner" has shown a flagrant disregard for Canada's territorial claims.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has gone so far as to call Canadian claims to the Northwest Passage "illegitimate" at a meeting of the Arctic Council earlier this year, flying in the face of a decades-old agreement that entitles Canada to call the sea route a part of its sovereign territory. The United States also disputes another offshore demarcation in the Beaufort Sea along the 141st meridian between Yukon and Alaska, a territory that is significant for its likelihood to contain rich oil and natural gas deposits. Given the aforementioned deficiencies in its Arctic infrastructure, it is incredibly unlikely that Canada could do anything to prevent the United States from violating this sovereignty, should the latter choose to translate words into action.

Equally concerning is the breakdown in relations between Canada and China, especially within the context of on-going geopolitical sparring between the United States and China, which shows increasing signs of spilling into the Arctic. Tensions between the Canadian government and the People's Republic of China first came into being in early December 2018 when Canada detained Meng Wanzhou, the CFO of Huawei, pending her arrest by U.S. authorities on charges of violating sanctions against Iran. Since then, the situation has escalated significantly, with China detaining a small number of Canadian citizens on its territory, a move which the Canadian government has interpreted as retaliatory action. In spite of the appointment of Dominic Barton, a former global managing director at McKinsey & Company, as the new Canadian ambassador to China on September 5, 2019, it is unlikely that Canada-China relations will improve in the near future. Canada's relations with Russia have similarly reached a standstill.

The relationship between the two countries has experienced steady deterioration since the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, when the Conservative government under **then Prime Minister Stephen Harper** imposed sanctions on Russia, eliciting a series of counter-sanctions in response, including a travel ban that forbids current Canadian **Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland** from entering Russia. Much like its relationship with China, Canada's relationship with Russia is also unlikely to see any improvement. Within the context of Arctic competition, the lack of a breakthrough on this front is particularly daunting given the potential for shared Canadian-Russian strategic interests in the region. As **Alison LeClaire**, the senior Arctic official at Global Affairs Canada, has pointed out:

> "With respect to co-operation with Russia, one need only look at a map of the circumpolar north to understand why working with them is in our interest. Together we share 75 per cent of the Arctic area… Russia's military presence in the Arctic is still much more modest than it was in the 1980s. Canada sees no immediate military threat in the Arctic, but we remain vigilant and are working with our allies and partners to keep the Arctic as a zone of peace and co-operation, a goal we share with Russia."

Unfortunately, such level-headed thinking has not yet been translated into an active policy approach.

Canada's grasp on its substantial Arctic territory, and the considerable resources that lie within it, thus remains tenuous. A looming federal election has placed Arctic policy matters on the back-burner, and whatever government emerges after October 21st will still have to contend with at least a few decades worth of deficiencies in the region's civil and military infrastructure. Moreover, a new government will necessarily have to repair relations with regional partners if it is to successfully manoeuvre through the growing turbulence in the Arctic's geopolitical situation. At its core, however, the problem of Canada's Arctic policy, or lack thereof, lies in its attachment and dependence to Western models of security and integration, and particularly to its traditional ally, the United States. This dependency has effectively stymied any imaginative approaches to foreign policy, and specifically where policy overlaps with Arctic concerns. As the situation stands presently, Canada runs the risk of having its backyard at the forefront of a confrontation between superpowers.

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