

Expert Group on Canada-US Relations



Trump, Greenland and the Arctic Is Canada Next on the Menu?

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Greenland and the Arctic

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Disclaimer

This discussion paper is intended to stimulate discussion on important issues related to Canadian Arctic policy. The opinions in this paper solely represent the views of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of other members of the Expert Group on Canada-U.S. Relations or the organizations of which both the authors and other members of the Expert Group are members.

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Executive Summary

While Donald Trump's threat to annex Greenland appears to have passed for now, the episode raises serious concerns about American ambitions in the Canadian north, especially in the context of the new US National Security Strategy with its aggressive version of the Monroe Doctrine.

If Trump were to turn his attention to Canada's Arctic, the US could pursue a number of military options as a demonstration of strength, most tempting being to send the US Navy or Coast Guard into the Northwest Passage.

The US has never accepted Canada's position that the Passage is internal waters under full Canadian sovereignty, instead claiming that it is an international strait subject to rights of transit by American naval vessels as well as overflight by US military aircraft.

Canada should be concerned about the vulnerability of these waters (and the airspace above them), as well as other parts of the Arctic that might be a target for America's ongoing expansionist aggression.

Urgent actions to counter these potential American challenges must be taken by the government, including substantially increased naval presence, additions to military infrastructure and surveillance, new fighter aircraft, enhanced icebreaking technology and capability, etc. These are among the numerous northern projects announced but not yet implemented. The government must move ahead with these immediately, as well as meet its NATO and NORAD commitments as an integral part of a determined and focused effort.

As the Prime Minister stated at Davos, middle powers like Canada can stand up to predatory Great Powers. In the Arctic, Canada has a chance to prove it.

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President Donald Trump's threat to seize Greenland – "whether they like it or not" – in the name of American national security has been dominating international headlines recently. After weeks of intense sabre-rattling, the president finally informed the world at Davos on 21 January that he would not use force to take the Danish territory – in his words, a mere "piece of ice". That same day, he met with NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte and hinted that a framework agreement over Greenland had been reached, though Danish authorities were quick to point out that they were not in the room and would demand a say. Weeks later, details of the alleged agreement remain sketchy. With the outcome still pending and the Danes continuing to push back, it appears that Trump's goal of swallowing the territory whole has come up well short.

The immediate threat to Greenland may have passed, but this episode continues to raise concerns about US ambitions in the Arctic, especially coming hard on the heels of a new National Security Strategy setting out a Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, as well as the subsequent US military intervention in Venezuela. For Canada, an Arctic nation and a neighbour of Greenland, the question naturally arises: are we next on the menu? Recent press reports out of Washington have suggested that Trump has been complaining again about Canada's military spending and the vulnerability of its Arctic region¹, raising the spectre that he could cast his eye on Canadian territory next, especially given his stated desire to turn the entire country into the 51st state.

Unlike the threat against Greenland, it is doubtful that Trump would attempt to seize vast swaths of Canadian Arctic territory. However, it is not impossible that he could deploy ground troops to Canada's Arctic islands as a demonstration of strength. While he could pursue some land options, the most tempting path might be to send the US Navy and Coast Guard into the waters of Canada's Arctic Archipelago (and its air forces into our airspace) without Canadian consent under the guise of safeguarding US security. The Northwest Passage, where the US has never accepted Canada's position that it is part of its internal waters—instead claiming that it is an international strait subject to unimpeded rights of transit by American vessels—might be the first target². While such a move would not be a simple feat during the ice-covered season (outside of submarines), it would suggest that Russian and Chinese vessels possess comparable rights and cannot be discounted. Canada should be concerned about the vulnerability of these waters to some form of American incursion, while not ignoring other parts of the region.

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-01-18/trump-complains-canada-vulnerable-to-us-rivals-in-arctic-nbc>

² Reference to the "Northwest Passage" generally refers to the route connecting Davis Strait, north of Baffin Island on the Atlantic side to Prince of Wales Strait, west of Victoria Island to the north coast of Yukon and Alaska.

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Northwest Passage – Possible Routes



Source: Wikipedia. Available at:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest_Passage#/media/File:Northwest_passage.jpg

This paper explores several options for a Canadian response to potential US provocations in the Arctic. But first, it is helpful to set the scene and remind readers of Canadian and American jockeying over the Northwest Passage in recent decades.

Over the last 150 years, Canada's sovereignty over its Arctic waters was not, for the most part, the subject of significant question. For one thing, at least until recently, the waters were ice-bound for over six months of the year, received little attention from foreign commercial interests and were relatively immune to geopolitical tensions, even during the Cold War.

The one exception has been the Northwest Passage, where tensions with the United States boiled over in the latter half of the 20th century, with the construction of ships capable of transiting Arctic waters even when they were partially or even largely ice-covered. These developments coincided with a series of United Nations conferences on the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS), which aimed to codify international law on matters of coastal state jurisdiction over the territorial sea, the exclusive economic zone, and, importantly, transit through straits used for international navigation. The last and most important of these conferences, the Third Law of the Sea Conference (UNCLOS III, 1973-1982), addressed a range of issues, including the rights of transit and coastal state jurisdiction over international straits.³

³ UNCLOS III concluded with the omnibus 1982 LOS Convention, a major achievement in multilateral relations and in the progressive development of international law. The Convention is now in force among most of the global community, although it has never been ratified by the US.

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The dispute with the US came into sharp focus in 1969, when a U.S.-registered tanker, the *SS Manhattan*, transited the Passage from west to east without Canadian consent, although the ship did require assistance from Canadian icebreakers. The voyage caused an uproar in Canada. The US held that the Passage was an international strait subject to the transit of foreign vessels. Canada argued that the Northwest Passage was internal waters and under full Canadian sovereignty, with no rights of unconsented transit.

In response to American claims, the Canadian government passed the *Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act* in 1970, which formally established Canadian jurisdiction over waters out to 100 nautical miles from the Arctic coastlines and issued groundbreaking vessel compliance standards to be enforced through Canadian regulations.

The dispute lay effectively dormant as UNCLOS III moved toward a conclusion in 1982. In 1985, however, after a US Coast Guard vessel, the *Polar Sea*, sailed through the waters without Canadian consent, the Mulroney government took a significant step by promulgating straight baselines around the entire archipelago, formalizing Canada's position that all the waters, including the Northwest Passage, were internal waters of Canada. The American government protested, arguing that the Passage was an international strait under both customary international law and UNCLOS, guaranteeing a right of transit passage for all vessels, including warships and submarines, as well as overflight⁴.

Both countries have maintained their respective positions since, although they quietly reached an agreement in 1988 stipulating that the US would seek Canadian consent before any of its Coast Guard or naval vessels transited the Passage, and that Canada would assent "without prejudice" to each side's legal position on the status of the strait. The dispute re-surfaced during the first Trump administration when former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated in May 2019 at the Arctic Council that Canada's claim over the Northwest Passage was "illegitimate", reiterating the US position that it is an international waterway⁵. In the meantime, global warming continues to make parts of the Passage relatively ice-free for long periods of the year.

With Greenland perhaps now off the international front burner, will Trump look to the Northwest Passage as the next "key strategic location" (a phrase from the *National Security Strategy*) for the US in the Western Hemisphere? Will he cite Russian and Chinese threats in the region as a pretext to dominate the waters militarily and undermine Canadian sovereignty? Could the Passage be a jumping-off point for further incursions into the waters and islands of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, following through on Trump's threat to claim Canada as part of the US and exploit its natural

⁴ There is a vast amount of literature on Canada-US differences over the Northwest Passage. For useful historical reviews, see: Burke, D.C., "The Northwest Passage Dispute", *Oxford Research Group* (2018); Handl, G., "Northwest Passage (Canadian-American Controversy)", *Max Planck Encyclopedia of International Law* (Oxford, 2013).

⁵ "U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says Canada's claim to the Northwest Passage is 'illegitimate': *National Post*, 6 May 2019 (<https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/pompeo-says-canadian-claim-to-northwest-passage-is-illegitimate>).

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resources?

President Trump is notoriously unpredictable, so there is no clear answer to any of these questions. But Canada must prepare for extreme scenarios under current circumstances. We offer the following options for the government to consider in responding to the potential threat of aggressive US moves, not only in the Northwest Passage but also more broadly in the region.

In the short term, the Canadian government should be prepared to boldly reiterate that the Passage is part of internal Canadian waters at the first sign of US provocation. To do so immediately might be poking the Trump administration in the eye unnecessarily, but the government should not wait until a crisis is upon us. At the same time, the Royal Canadian Navy should begin more regular transits of the Passage, whether by Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) or Canadian Coast Guard vessels, to demonstrate Canadian presence. Transits of the AOPS have been intermittent at best in recent years. This has to change.

In addition, while the government has committed to increasing its Arctic military capacities and capabilities as part of the 2024 Defence Update (*Our North Strong and Free*) and other recent announcements, this must be expedited. Canada must show the US that it is serious about protecting its territorial sovereignty in the region. This includes purchasing new submarines, tactical helicopters and early warning aircraft as quickly as possible, deploying Arctic-capable drones, making a final decision on the F-35, meeting deadlines for the construction of two new polar icebreakers (the first is scheduled to be delivered in 2030), placing maritime sensors on the Arctic Offshore and Patrol Ships, building satellite ground stations, establishing Arctic operational support hubs, and constructing dual-use infrastructure, including ports. The list is long. The US has criticized us before, often justifiably, for talking a good game in the Arctic but not following through. We can no longer afford to proceed at a leisurely pace.

At the same time, the Government needs to meet broader NATO defence spending targets to dispel Trump's ongoing contention that we are defence freeloaders, including in the Arctic. The Carney government has promised to spend an additional \$81 billion on defence over the next five years and meet the 5% NATO spending target by 2035. This cannot be an empty promise – the government needs to set out a clear path to its delivery to show Trump that we are taking our defence commitments seriously. The first sign that we are missing this target will be a gift to the President in the Arctic.

Greenland has shown that President Trump will back down in the face of determined opposition. Canada must work with NATO allies to ensure its Arctic sovereignty is respected. Middle power cooperation was at the heart of Prime Minister Mark Carney's recent speech at Davos — the need to form coalitions of the willing to stand up to great-power bullying on specific issues. Reports that NATO will step up its Arctic presence as part of a potential Greenland agreement are excellent news in this respect. Canada should lead those efforts. While most European countries share the US position that the Northwest Passage is an international strait, they do not want to see the US dominate or militarize it.

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Notwithstanding all of the above, including the Prime Minister's Davos speech, Canada must still look for ways to work with the US in the Arctic. This may be difficult for Canadians to accept under current circumstances — especially amid talk of pursuing trade and security diversification and strategic autonomy — but it is a practical hedging strategy given our shared geography and interests in meeting Russian and Chinese threats. Our relationship, particularly in the defence sphere, will continue to require a delicate balancing act — pushing back where necessary, but working together where possible. If Canada can prove it has the military and other capabilities to operate in the Arctic, it will be seen by the US as both a deterrent against aggressive actions and an opportunity to work with its northern neighbour.

This means continuing with the modernization of NORAD (including over-the-horizon radar), exploring the possibility of expanding the binational command's mandate to include joint maritime patrols in Arctic waters and specifically the Northwest Passage, seriously considering participation in the US ballistic missile defence system (*Golden Dome*), cooperating where possible in the extraction and processing of critical minerals, and continuing to work with Finland and the US, at least for now, as part of the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort.

Canadians can only hope that, if an agreement over Greenland comes to fruition, President Trump will look beyond the Arctic for his next venture in the Western Hemisphere. But there is no guarantee. Canada must be ready for anything, and the Canadian Arctic is an obvious target. As Prime Minister Carney stated at Davos, middle powers like Canada can stand up to predatory great powers. In the Arctic, he has a chance to prove it.

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Expert Group on Canada-US Relations

The Expert Group on Canada-U.S. Relations is focused on developing the key elements of a comprehensive Canadian strategy for Canada-U.S. relations. Its work is supported by The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, and the Canadian Global Affairs Institute.

Co-chairs

The Honourable Perrin Beatty, PC, OC, is a director and business advisor. He is the former President and CEO of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and served as minister in seven portfolios, including Treasury Board, National Revenue, Solicitor General, National Defence, National Health and Welfare, and Communications and External Affairs.

Fen Osler Hampson, FRSC, is the Chancellor's Professor and Professor of International Affairs at Carleton University and President of the World Refugee & Migration Council. A graduate of the University of Toronto, the London School of Economics, and Harvard University, he is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and the author and co-editor of 48 books on Canadian foreign and economic policy, as well as international relations.

Members

Thomas d'Aquino is the Founding CEO and Distinguished Life Member of the Business Council of Canada, formerly known as the Canadian Council of Chief Executives. He is also a founder and Chair Emeritus of the North American Forum and has served as a director of several of Canada's leading global enterprises. He has also served as a Special Assistant to the Prime Minister of Canada and as a Professor of International Trade and Business Transactions at the University of Ottawa Law School. He is the author of the #1 national best-seller, *Private Power Public Purpose*.

Louise Blais served as Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations from 2017 to 2021 and was responsible for the 2030 Agenda and the campaign for the Security Council. She also served on the UNICEF Executive Board, which has a \$7 billion budget, where she was elected Vice Chair in 2019. She was appointed co-facilitator by the President of the UN General Assembly for the 31st Special Session on COVID-19. She began her career as an Art Theft Analyst at Interpol. She then served as Program Manager for the National Archives Development Program from 1992 to 1996 before joining the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1992. Abroad, she was first posted to the Washington Embassy, then to Tokyo and Paris. During her 5-year mandate in France, she and the team at the Embassy were responsible for preparing Canada's participation in the G8 Summit in Deauville and the G20 in Cannes. In Ottawa, she held the positions of Director of Public Diplomacy and Executive Director of Human Resources Management, overseeing over 2,000 rotational employees worldwide.

Carlo Dade is the Director of International Policy at the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy. He was previously the founder and Director of the Trade and Trade Infrastructure Policy Research Centre at Canada West Foundation. Among other notable accomplishments, he made significant contributions to developing a national trade infrastructure plan and revitalizing Canada's trade corridors.

Laura Dawson is the Principal Program Manager (Americas) at Amazon Web Services Institute at Amazon Web Services. Named one of Canada's Top 100 foreign policy influencers by the Hill Times in 2014, Dawson is a speaker, writer, and thought leader on Canada-U.S., NAFTA, TPP, and international trade issues. Previously, she served as the Director of the Wilson Centre's Canada

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Institute, was a senior advisor on economic affairs at the United States Embassy in Ottawa and taught international trade and Canada-U.S. relations at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. Dawson continues to serve as Emeritus Advisor at Dawson Strategic, which provides advice to businesses on cross-border trade, market access and regulatory issues. She is a Fellow at the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute and serves on the board of the Council of the Great Lakes Region.

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Lawrence L. Herman is an international trade lawyer with Cassidy Levy Kent LLP (Ottawa & Washington) and Herman & Associates (Toronto). He was previously a member of Canada's mission to the UN and the GATT. He has advocated cases before the Canadian International Trade Tribunal (CITT), NAFTA panels, and Canadian courts.

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Marie-Lucie Morin is the Vice-chair of the Board of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. She served as Executive Director for Canada, Ireland, and the Caribbean at the World Bank from 2010 to 2013. Before joining the World Bank, Ms. Morin pursued a 30-year career in the Federal Public Service. She was appointed National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister and Associate Secretary to the cabinet (2008 – 2010); previously served as Deputy Minister for International Trade and as Associate Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (2003 -2008). During the earlier years

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of her career with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ms. Morin completed assignments in San Francisco, Jakarta, London, and Moscow. She was appointed Ambassador to the Kingdom of Norway with concurrent accreditation to the Republic of Iceland (1997 – 2001). Ms. Morin was awarded the Governor General's 125th Anniversary of the Confederation of Canada Medal, was named Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur in 2012 and became a member of the Order of Canada in 2016.

Vice-Admiral (Retired) Mark Norman retired from the Royal Canadian Navy in the rank of Vice-Admiral in August of 2019 after over 39 years of service. Norman started his naval service as a reserve diesel mechanic in 1980 and rose through the ranks to be the Vice-Chief of Defence. His military career has seen him serve at sea domestically and internationally, command a warship, the Canadian Atlantic Fleet, and ultimately the Royal Canadian Navy itself. Since retirement, Norman has applied his energy to a variety of pursuits, including as Champion for the Royal Canadian Benevolent Fund, Senior Defence Strategist at Samuel Associates, contributing to the critical debate about security and defence issues in Canada as both a fellow with the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and as a member of the Conference of Defence Associations Board.

Vincent Rigby is the Slater Family Professor of Practice and, formerly, the McConnell Visiting Professor for 2022-2023 at McGill University. He recently retired from Canada's Public Service after 30 years in senior posts across various departments and agencies, including the Privy Council Office, Global Affairs Canada, Public Safety, the Department of National Defence, and the former Canadian International Development Agency.

Colin Robertson is a former Canadian diplomat and Vice President and Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and hosts its regular Global Exchange podcast. He is an Executive Fellow at the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy, a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University and a member of the Defence Advisory Board of the Department of National Defence.

Tim Sargent is a senior fellow and Director of the Domestic Policy Program at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. He is also a distinguished fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, a Waterloo-based think-tank that addresses significant global issues at the intersection of technology and international governance. Before joining MLI, Sargent was deputy executive director at the Centre for the Study of Living Standards. He also spent 28 years in the federal government, where he held deputy minister and associate deputy minister positions at Fisheries and Oceans, International Trade, Finance, and Agriculture and AgriFood, as well as senior positions at the Privy Council Office. At Fisheries and Oceans, he oversaw the Passage and implementation of major overhauls to the Fisheries Act and the Oceans Act, as well as the Canadian Coast Guard's multi-billion-dollar fleet renewal plan. At International Trade, he oversaw the successful negotiations for the Canada-US-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Sargent has a PhD in Economics from the University of British Columbia, an MA in Economics from Western University and a BA (Econ) from the University of Manchester.

John Weekes is an international trade policy adviser with experience in trade agreements and the settlement of trade disputes. From 1991 to 1994, he served as Canada's chief negotiator for NAFTA. He was Ambassador to GATT during the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations, as well as Chair of the GATT Council in 1989 and Chair of the Contracting Parties to the GATT in 1990.