

# Canada's new Arctic foreign policy: Can it meet a complex reality?

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Cover image shows Canadian Forces Station Alert in Nunavut.  
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## Introduction

As the Arctic undergoes a dramatic [transformation](#) from climate change, Canada also finds itself a significant competitor in a new global race. Melting ice caps represent not only environmental catastrophe but new targets for the ambitions of geopolitical adversaries.

There is no denying the Arctic's strategic [significance](#) to many states. Many see the Arctic as a critical area, rich with opportunities to extract rare minerals and other essential resources, develop alternative shipping routes, extend economic infrastructure, and establish new military strongholds. In most cases, cooperation and competition are balanced among likeminded [North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies](#), such as Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and the United States.

However, more hostile states, such as Russia and China, are making aggressive moves that Canada, a northern nation with the second-largest Arctic landmass, cannot afford to ignore. Russia is building up its [military](#) in its own Arctic region by constructing new airfields, ports and [submarines](#). [China](#) is also growing its presence in the north; [Chinese vessels](#) are not only carrying out scientific research but gathering intelligence and furthering military research. For the moment, as national security expert [Wesley Wark](#) notes, both the Russians and Chinese are focusing on economic infrastructure and resource extraction; for example, between 10 and 20 per cent of Russia's GDP comes from the Arctic.

Against this background, Canada's new [Arctic Foreign Policy](#) was released on December 6, 2024. With security and protection of sovereignty at its core, this new policy attempts to juggle domestic and foreign interests and commitments. Importantly, it juxtaposes the pressing challenges of climate change with the shifting dynamics of regional geopolitics. A good beginning, the policy still needs to clarify specific steps that must be taken to achieve the declared objectives. As well, implementers must take care not to view the Arctic through a simple security lens.

## The context of previous policies

The new Arctic Foreign Policy is grounded on, and aligns with, the updated defence policy [Our North, Strong and Free](#), released in April 2024. But this reliance on a defence policy does not provide the broader framework that would clarify the Arctic's place in Canada's overall foreign policy objectives. A defence focus risks prioritizing militarization over collaboration and could undermine opportunities for Indigenous or international involvement,

scientific cooperation, and sustainable development efforts in the region. It could also exacerbate tensions with other Arctic nations, further fostering an adversarial environment that complicates efforts to address shared challenges like climate change and resource management.

Moreover, the new Arctic Foreign Policy heavily emphasizes the importance of the United States as Canada's Arctic ally, neglecting to provide possible strategies to respond to the incoming Trump administration and anticipated tensions and challenges over disputed areas such as the [Beaufort Sea](#). It remains to be seen if the policy itself, with its focus on working with the United States on environmental protection, will even be feasible with the new U.S. administration. Consider, for example, that the United States has once again [withdrawn](#) from the Paris Climate Accord.

This new Arctic policy is also developed to align with the [Canadian Arctic and Northern Policy Framework](#) (ANPF), which emphasizes the importance of supporting the social and economic well-being of northern Indigenous peoples and fostering partnerships in decision-making. The ANPF was developed with more than 25 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis governing bodies, as well as territorial and provincial governments; this collaborative approach ensured that Indigenous knowledge, rights, and perspectives were embedded in the framework. It should be noted, however, that the development of the Arctic Foreign Policy did not have the same degree of Indigenous involvement. [Consultations](#) with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis were prioritized, as was engagement with territorial and provincial governments. However, the policy differed from the ANPF in that Indigenous leaders were not involved in its writing.

## Canadian Arctic and Northern Policy Framework focuses on 8 [goals](#)



## Policy overview

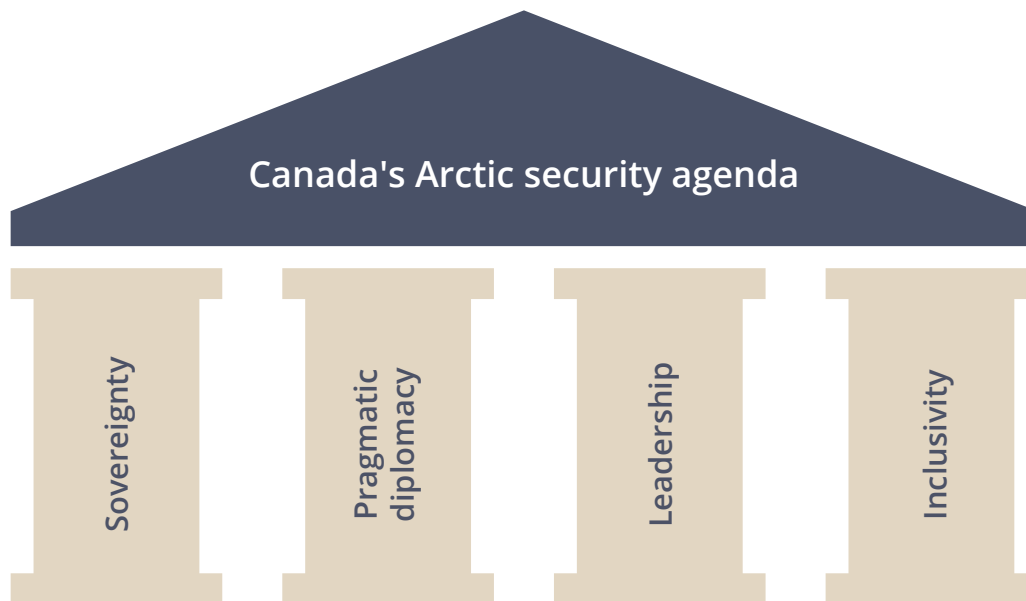
The new Arctic Foreign Policy offers several key innovations designed to strengthen Canada's engagement in Arctic and international affairs. The four main pillars that make up the policy outline Canada's strategic position in the Arctic. However, although the policy includes some funding and infrastructure commitments, it fails to make actionable [recommendations](#) that would ensure successful implementation.

The policy allocates \$34.7 million, with an additional \$7 million in ongoing support, mostly to fund a new ambassador role in a Nordic state and related consulates (see #4 below). Here we see an example of Canada's focus on collaboration with key allies, which include the United States, Nordic countries, non-Arctic states in the North Atlantic, and the North Pacific states of Japan and South Korea. As Wark [notes](#), only the focus on Japan and South Korea is new.

The policy reaffirms Canada's commitments to address climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, with a specific aim to limit coal usage and adhere to international frameworks.

### Pillars of the new Arctic Foreign Policy

1. *Assert Canada's sovereignty:* Canada aims to assert sovereignty over its Arctic territory by employing diplomacy and reaffirming the commitments in the recent defence policy update to reinforce the resources of Canada's military. Diplomatic initiatives outlined in the Arctic Foreign Policy are meant to align with defence investments, enhancing Canada's strategic approach and its relationships with Arctic allies.
2. *Use pragmatic diplomacy to advance Canada's interests:* Canada seeks to advance its Arctic interests by collaborating with key partners and ensuring that maritime claims made by Canada or any other state adhere to international law.
3. *Lead on Arctic governance and multilateral challenges:* Canada wants to be a leader in Arctic governance, particularly at the level of the Arctic Council. Canada reaffirms its commitment to address regional and global challenges such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and pollution; as well as its support for international agreements like the Paris Agreement and the Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework.
4. *Adopt a more inclusive approach to Arctic diplomacy:* Arctic diplomacy will be based on an inclusive approach. A new diplomatic position will be established within one of Canada's Nordic missions in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden; it will be charged with connecting Nordic domestic concerns with Canada's foreign affairs mandate. Canada will also establish a consulate in Anchorage, Alaska, and another in Nuuk, Greenland.



### Climate focus

The Arctic Foreign Policy recognizes climate change as a “threat multiplier” that creates security risks not previously considered. Still, strategies to mitigate climate change in the Arctic must be carefully balanced with more traditional enhancements of military capabilities for deterrence and detection. It is not clear that the policy acknowledges that a greater military presence could contribute to environmental degradation in this fragile region.

### Juggling domestic and foreign priorities

The new Arctic Foreign Policy notes that Canada is committed to strengthening its presence in the North American Arctic through deeper collaboration with the United States and the maintenance of strong ties with Nordic NATO allies. However, engaging with the new Trump administration will be a significant challenge.

Canada also aims to cooperate with China on global issues like climate change, which impact the Arctic. As well, the Canadian Coast Guard will enhance partnerships with regional coast guards from likeminded states to bolster Arctic cooperation. Other efforts will focus on expanding opportunities for Indigenous and northern partners in global negotiations and strengthening Canada’s presence at Arctic events.

### Effective implementation

#### Collaborating to reduce the threat of conflict

In broader discussions among security and [defence](#) experts in Canada, the call for a greater military presence in the Arctic is getting louder. Although the Arctic Foreign Policy is guided

by defence and security principles, it does reach beyond concepts of sovereignty to address a range of issues, including climate change and diplomacy. While the policy makes progress in recognizing the region's significance, its effectiveness will depend on how it is implemented.

The Arctic is warming nearly [four times as quickly](#) as the rest of the planet. The consequences are far-reaching: rising sea levels, loss of biodiversity, extreme weather events—the list goes on. Canada must strengthen its position as a responsible Arctic power by leading climate diplomacy and investing in scientific research that monitors and mitigates the region's changing conditions. By championing environmental cooperation, Canada can foster partnerships with Arctic and non-Arctic states alike, even among geopolitical opponents.

At the same time, Canada must ensure its sovereignty is well protected, particularly in an era of renewed great-power competition. However, militarizing the Arctic in a knee-jerk reaction to other nations' ambitions, real or perceived, risks alienating potential partners and exacerbating tensions in a region that demands stability and cooperation. A measured approach—focused on cooperation, multilateral institutions like the Arctic Council, and investment in northern infrastructure—would more effectively secure Canada's interests.

As well, prioritizing diplomatic engagement can help Canada strengthen its leadership role in peaceful dispute resolutions among non-likeminded states. Canada must not only prioritize our most valued neighbour, the United States, but also recognize the leadership of Russia and China as two major Arctic stakeholders, aiming to address shared challenges and opportunities in the region.

At the moment, a fruitful engagement with the leaders of either Russia or China is unlikely. Given the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the continuing conflict, diplomacy with Russia in the Arctic will be limited. However, opportunities for engagement among the scientific community, for example, should be pursued; a broad dialogue with various states on climate impacts could be one avenue for Canada to pursue.

Ultimately, implementation of Canada's Arctic policy must be based on the understanding that, while the Arctic faces geopolitical challenges, the region's chief concerns are environmental, requiring engagement from all stakeholders.

## **The importance of Indigenous involvement**

It is important to acknowledge that Indigenous communities have lived in and cared for this environment for millennia. A Canadian Arctic policy that genuinely respects and accepts Indigenous Peoples as stewards of the land and key voices in decision-making would distinguish Canada as a leader in inclusive and sustainable governance. In practice, this means that the federal government will need to support Indigenous-led climate-adaptation initiatives, safeguard cultural and economic livelihoods, and recognize Indigenous land rights in meaningful, actionable ways.

## Final thoughts

Canada's approach to its Arctic territories must prioritize cooperation over confrontation, stewardship over militarization, and partnership with Indigenous communities over unilateral federal action. Such a strategic approach, while not neglecting national security, would focus on greater cooperation with other Arctic states while developing policies on climate change adaptation and mitigation that meet Canada's unique needs and circumstances. While the current policy, as it stands, sets forth Canada's priorities, it is not clear how these priorities will be attained.

The international community cannot risk exclusionary frameworks that fail to recognize the complexities of this shared environment. Such approaches can undermine collective efforts to address pressing issues such as climate change, resource management, and domestic security in the Arctic region. Although the policy addresses these concerns, Canada cannot rely only on its relationship with the United States to address Arctic issues moving forward. The Arctic region demands diplomatic engagement with all key Arctic states and stakeholders.

The present Arctic Foreign Policy remains vague on several topics and does not introduce significant new funding or initiatives. Such omissions are not unprecedented; Canada's 2009 Arctic policy under the previous Conservative government, [Canada's Northern Strategy: Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future](#), also focused primarily on outlining government priorities and objectives rather than specifying concrete programs or expenditures. However, the new framework does update goals and strategic directions for the government in response to growing tensions in the region.

It is time now for concrete actions. A good starting point: Canada should initiate an Arctic security dialogue at the ministerial level to flesh out the ways to tackle the complex security problems that the Arctic faces. Careful thought should be given to selecting a forum capable of addressing the challenging diplomatic relationships while ensuring the participation of key states. As well, the integration of environmental stewardship into defence operations would allow Canada to address both kinds of security challenges.

The Arctic Foreign Policy provides a solid foundation for the long road ahead. But to enhance its effectiveness, dialogue between the federal government and Indigenous and northern populations needs to be maintained. Indeed, prioritizing diplomatic engagement, even with adversaries, can help Canada establish itself as a leader in Arctic governance, fostering collaboration and setting a tone for constructive dialogue on shared challenges. Climate and environmental stewardship requires actionable recommendations with implementation plans to encourage a results-oriented process to safeguard the Arctic beyond our sovereign borders.

Not only a source of opportunities and a recipient of defence considerations, the Arctic holds profound cultural and environmental significance. It is more than a prime region for

defence strategists; it is home to Indigenous communities, diverse wildlife, and unique ecosystems. All need the protection and consideration of the federal government as it develops new foreign and domestic policies.



Inuksuk is a manmade stone landmark or cairn built by peoples of the Arctic region of North America.



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