Briefing Note

Arctic Indigenous Peoples and the State: Toward a Universal Convergence of Arctic Reconciliation

Barry Scott Zellen

Since the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban in the summer of 2021, attention has been once again refocused on the importance of the human terrain to regional stability and security – whether in the old battle zones of the Global War on Terror, or future theatres of potential conflict such as what the United States Navy has recently described as the Blue Arctic. If there is a system-wide vulnerability that could be exploited by a diplomatically skilled and economically powerful external actor in the Blue Arctic, it would most likely be found in its least populous and most remote areas where human security issues remain a work in progress. If there is to be a new Cold War in the Arctic region – and many believe there already is one – continued gains in native development will be crucial to its successful outcome. And it is here that the United States and its Arctic allies possess many natural advantages, presenting the world with an exemplary model for more inclusive and effective governance in partnership with the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic.

Hearts and minds: The looming battle for the Arctic's human terrain

With the recent fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban on the heels of America's military withdrawal, attention is once again refocused on the importance of the human terrain to regional stability and security – whether in the old battle zones of the Global War on Terror, or future theatres of conflict such as what the United States Navy has recently described as the "Blue Arctic" (United States Navy, 2021). If there is a system-wide vulnerability that could be exploited by a diplomatically skilled and economically powerful external actor in the Blue Arctic, it would most likely be found in its least populous and most remote areas, such as Canada's vast Arctic archipelago north of the Canadian mainland, where Inuit have in recent decades settled their outstanding land claims and innovated new systems of self-governance, including the 1999 formation of the Nunavut Territory, a vast territory of increasingly strategic lands and waters with a population of just over 40,000. Also potentially vulnerable to external influences is neighboring Greenland, which has been undergoing its own incremental (and thus far amicable) process of decolonization between its majority Inuit

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populace and its colonial sovereign, Denmark – and whose population of just over 50,000 lacks the internal capacity to unilaterally defend its vast EEZ, providing an opportunity for its alliance partners to collectively contribute to regional security in the event of a Danish withdrawal in an independence scenario.

Indeed, one can detect a common human terrain vulnerability in both the archipelagic (high) Arctic and on the Arctic mainland of both North America and Eurasia, where numerous economically struggling interior and coastal villages dot the vast, underpopulated, and remote frontier regions of several of the Arctic states, forming isolated islands of humanity separated by vast distances of open space with an insularity that is as isolating as that found in the even more lightly populated offshore Arctic islands. In these vast archipelagos, real or metaphorical (in much the same way that renowned Russian literary giant, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, perceived Siberia in his classic book, *The Gulag Archipelago*), a struggle to win the hearts and minds of locally predominant Indigenous peoples there may emerge as the next strategically salient regionwide fault line, internally dividing each of the otherwise stable Arctic states into regions of contested human terrain in an Arctic manifestation of the same dynamics described by Thomas P.M. Barnett almost two decades ago in his theoretical work on the Pentagon's (then) "New Map," with a persistent "Functioning Core" and "Non-Integrating Gap" (Barnett, 2003; Barnett, 2004).

A similar fault line is retrospectively apparent in the outer Aleutians, where three quarters of a century ago Japan invaded and occupied the predominantly Unangan (Aleut) islands of Attu and Kiska, after bombing Amaknak Island, home to the Dutch Harbor Naval Operating Base, and U.S. Army's Fort Mears (Perras, 2003). As a an example of what was perceived as a "triangular" strategic contest between the armed forces of imperial Japan on the one hand, and the United States (in coalition with Canada) on the other, the Indigenous Unangan people were caught in the middle and perceived by combatants on both sides as peripheral to the conflict, and thus transported to distant evacuation centers in both countries where they endured much hardship and suffered great losses (Arnold, 2011; Perras, 2003). Such tragic consequences to Indigenous peoples caught between combatants were all too common in World War II, from the liberation of the Aleutians, the first island chain to be retaken from the Japanese in 1943, all the way to the very last in the Battle of Okinawa, where U.S. forces wrestled back control of contested strategic islands from the Japanese at an enormously high cost to the local Indigenous population, trapped as they were between the warring parties much the way the Unangan had been two years earlier.

Similar tales of dispossession and exile continued to take place across much of Arctic North America during the Cold War that followed the end of World War II, creating tensions between Inuit and Ottawa, Washington, and Copenhagen (Kunuk, 2009; Kunuk, 2018; Arnold, 2011; Perras, 2003). The consequences of these kinetic collisions between Arctic Indigenous peoples and modern states asserting sovereignty in the Arctic were very often tragic; as Canada's Qikiqtani Truth Commission has described: "For Inuit, the loss of home is more than the loss of a dwelling — it is a disruption of a critical relationship of people with the land and animals. It represents the loss of independence and replacement of a way of life" (Qikiqtani Truth Commission, 2013). Understanding the historical context and near universality of this internal fault line across the Arctic can help illuminate the strategic saliency of the human terrain within the Arctic states, and presents a potential vector for external manipulation and destabilization that could disrupt the internal balance of power between distant governments of the "center" and the isolated Indigenous villages

of the "periphery" – forging a new line of conflict that could come into play during a period of intensified strategic competition in the Arctic. This is true whether a campaign of hybrid warfare of the sort mastered by Moscow in recent years, or the "checkbook diplomacy" (or, as it became known, "debt-trap diplomacy") favored by China, or the even less probable scenario of a formal state of war between rival states for control of the Arctic domain, as experienced at a theatre level during World War II with the Japanese occupation of the outer Aleutians, and narrowly avoided by allied successes in both the Battle of Britain, and the Battle of the Atlantic, which prevented German expansion to Arctic North America.

Indigenous polities and world order

Whether in the Arctic, or further south throughout the world ocean, these sorts of tensions and vulnerabilities in state-Indigenous relations are commonplace, as observed by American forces in the Pacific from Guam to Okinawa; and by allied partners who maintain their own offshore bases on remote islands across Oceania. China, as it expands its influence deeper into the Pacific, finds itself facing similar tensions and vulnerabilities along Indigenous fault lines, creating a vast, interconnected theater of strategic competition where local Indigenous polities gain an increasing geopolitical importance to the international order, just as we experienced during the Global War on Terror (GWOT), and as the fall of Afghanistan has painfully reminded us recently. While Indigenous populations in these remote, often insular, territories may be relatively small, they are locally and regionally predominant, and essential to the security of both the North Pacific and North Atlantic, just as they are to the security of the Arctic basin itself. The United States Coast Guard recognizes and deeply understands this at its very core and has been working closely with the Indigenous communities of Alaska for the past century and a half, ever since the Alaska purchase freed many Alaska natives from the near-enslavement of colonization by the Russian-American Company.

A widely perceived and discussed strategic triangle pitting Washington's interests against those of an aligned Moscow/Beijing axis presumes an inherently unitary structure of the Arctic states, but in much of the Arctic, states are not unitary but are instead former colonial states cobbled together across the centuries by expanding states from the Westphalian core of Europe as they reached out across the seas, leaving Indigenous peoples and their local governing structures largely intact (in contrast to farther south) and fostering hybrid colonial governance via local (and for the most part, corporate trading) proxies. Limited in manpower and dependent upon native hunters and trappers to exploit the region's bounty of furs, the colonial era Chartered Companies, whether Russian, British, or Danish, preserved prior power relationships and networks in the precolonial world that could be successfully leveraged in the interest of ascendant colonial powers. Because this remains a defining feature of several Arctic states including Russia, the United States (Alaska), Canada (NWT and Nunavut), and Denmark (Greenland), a lingering fault line persists between center and periphery, largely aligning with the settler elites (and their descendants) in command of the state apparatus to the relative south, and the Indigenous communities in the more remote northern hinterland that have been gradually regaining self-governing powers.

Understanding this internal historic dynamic and achieving a stable balance of interests through inclusive and respectful policies of native social, economic and political development can thus be of significant strategic consequence in the event of future external agitation by a non-Arctic state, and to the future stability of the Arctic region, and thus requires sustained investment, respectful

relationship-building, and a continuous process of confidence-building measures as illustrated by the recent U.S. re-engagement with Greenland, lest an external actor seeks to destabilize the status quo. Because of the many socioeconomic challenges facing northern villages from one end of the Arctic to the other, this is a potential vulnerability that an external power could seek to exploit – and, some argue, has already become a target for exploitation by Beijing through its Polar Silk Road, part of its global Belt and Road Initiative. Because Arctic Indigenous homelands have been imperfectly integrated with the political economies of the Arctic states, despite much progress from ongoing efforts in recent decades, this remains a near universal fault line across the Arctic and a challenge faced internally by the seven Arctic states that have Indigenous populations engaged in long-term processes of cultural renewal, economic development, and restoration of land rights (and externally by the eighth, Iceland, which has no Indigenous populace of its own, owing to the Norse becoming its first inhabitants in the 9th century).

Progress on this front varies greatly by region and by state, offering an uneven opportunity for external influencers. Russia has in recent years mastered the art of "hybrid warfare" below the threshold of formally declared war (Garamone, 2019; Deep, 2015), as demonstrated in its persistent but low-level interventions along the arc of what it once referred to as its "near abroad" (Safire, 1994) and with particularly effective results in Crimea in 2014. Beijing has similarly deployed "checkbook diplomacy" (Hamilton, 2016) to coopt elites along the global network envisioned by its BRI, including its northern component, the Polar Silk Road. The latter has faced strong blowback against what the United States and its allies have successfully reframed as "debt-trap diplomacy" (Taj, 2019; Lanteigne, 2019; Pompeo, 2019), while the former has on its own generated a near-universal distrust, particularly by states bordering Russia that fear they could become the next Crimea. In short, tactical blunders by both Moscow and Beijing in their efforts to coerce smaller polities and peoples have blunted their capacity to project power into the Arctic (with the exception, of course, of Moscow's own Arctic territories and waters, where its sovereignty remains uncontested, but where it remains far behind its democratic Arctic counterparts in reconciling State and Indigenous interests).

Indigenous engagement and the containment of China's Arctic ambitions

Intriguingly, the strengthening alignment of interests between Indigenous peoples and their sovereign states across the non-Russian Arctic from Alaska to Finland may provide the democratic Arctic with an inherent advantage over Russia, whose own native peoples remain marginalized, their lands and resources encroached upon or expropriated, and many of their leaders either exiled or effectively marginalized (Nilsen, 2019; Balzer, 2021). One can even imagine the democratic Arctic states mastering in turn the art of hybrid warfare if a future Arctic Cold War intensifies, just as many of them by necessity re-mastered the art of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare during the long GWOT – including Human Terrain Mapping (HTM), which became central to U.S. strategy during its many battles to win Indigenous hearts and minds in multiple theatres of operations, and which defined the political orders imposed on post-conflict countries throughout that conflict (Zellen, 2012) – and by confidently and proactively turning the tables on Moscow, winning the battle for the hearts and minds of Russia's own oppressed native peoples, a process already underway to a limited degree with the warm diplomatic reception enjoyed by Russian Indigenous leaders in Arctic governing institutions like the Arctic Council where Arctic Indigenous organizations enjoy a distinct membership status as Permanent Participants, second only to the

founding member states (the A8), and superior in organizational status to the many observer organizations and states, among which China is included.

One can even cautiously hope that Russia may come to realize that its security can be best strengthened by achieving parity with its democratic counterparts on the Arctic Council in the area of Indigenous rights and empowerment. This may in fact be under way and could explain the notable prominence of Indigenous issues in Russia's latest Arctic policy update (Office of the President of the Russian Federation, 2020). It could also explain some interesting but little reported pronouncements by Vladimir Putin several years ago recognizing the Ainu people (whose homeland, since World War II's end, has been partitioned by Russia and Japan) as Indigenous to Russia, catching the attention of Tokyo, where Ainu recognition has been advancing at an incremental pace, suggesting a potential diplomatic advantage of a more pro-active approach by Moscow on Ainu rights issues. Engaging in the battle for influence of the Indigenous Arctic human terrain could thus be to Russia's advantage, helping to neutralize its diplomatic and political vulnerability on this issue vis-à-vis the West. In so doing, the inter-Arctic collaborative dynamic would also be strengthened, further neutralizing any risk associated with the increasingly competitive strategic triangularity described above.

With its deep pockets, China may take the opportunity to retool its approach, shifting further away from "debt-trap diplomacy" to foster a more mutually beneficial model of Arctic economic development, positioning Beijing to more adeptly exploit any shortfalls by Arctic states to sufficiently support and re-empower their own Indigenous peoples who are intimately aware of any unevenness in Arctic social, cultural and economic development; a shift whose beginnings are evident in China's 2018 Arctic white paper where it, matching Japan, its principal regional rival, makes reference to Indigenous issues seven times. This is especially noteworthy for a country that does not even recognize its own domestic Indigenous peoples and continues to impose its will on its many diverse minorities, particularly those aspiring to greater autonomy. So, a triumph by the democratic Arctic states is by no means guaranteed with regard to a future battle for Indigenous hearts and minds, but the democratic Arctic states still have many advantages over Russia and China that make it unlikely either of these rivals could meaningfully undermine western influence in the region, or dilute the undisputed sovereignty they have over their respective Arctic territories.

If there is to be a new Cold War in the Arctic region – and many believe there already is one – continued gains in native development will be crucial to its successful outcome; and it is here that the United States and its allies possess many natural advantages, presenting an opportunity to consolidate victory and achieve an unrivaled regional supremacy through more inclusive and effective governance – in partnership with the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic.

Indigenous engagement: A universal convergence of Arctic policies and strategies

When examining the Arctic policies and strategies of the Arctic states as well as non-Arctic states with Arctic interests and ambitions, one can detect the emergence of a new common theme embraced, at least rhetorically by all, on the issue of Indigenous engagement and inclusion – evidence that states are well aware of the importance of Indigenous peoples to Arctic security, and to the maximization of their Arctic interests. This true of the Arctic states as well as non-Arctic states, whether democratic or authoritarian in governance, and including even the self-proclaimed

"Near-Arctic" state, China. Indeed, if we examine the frequency and context for the use of the terms "Indigenous," "tribe/tribal," and "native" in recently articulated Arctic policies and strategies of the countries most active in the Arctic region, we can gain an appreciation of how far along we already are in this convergence of Indigenous inclusion.

A quick tally shows the April 2019 U.S. Coast Guard's *Arctic Strategic Outlook* (United States Coast Guard, 2019) mentioning these terms *26 times*, compared to the *3* mentions in the July 2020 U.S. Air Force's *Arctic Strategy* (United States Air Force, 2020) and the *5* mentions in the U.S. Navy's January 2021 *A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic* (United States Navy, 2021), an indication of the enduring importance of Indigenous relations to the Coast Guard as a service, with its long, century-and-a-half engagement in Alaska and its close relationship to its coastal communities, where many a SAR mission has endeared the hearts of locals to the service. Coming as a surprise to some, Russia's *Arctic Policy Foundations to 2035* (Office of the President of the Russian Federation, 2020) released in July 2020 mentions Indigenous issues a total of *17 times*, greatly exceeding both China's 2018 *Arctic White Paper* (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018) and Japan's 2015 *Arctic Policy* (Headquarters for Ocean Policy, 2015) by more than a factor of two, with their respective *7* mentions each. Now, all of these are dwarfed by Canada's 2019 *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2019) with its 188 mentions, as Indigenous issues and perspectives, and the historic reconciliation of the Canadian state with its Indigenous peoples, has been particularly evident in Ottawa's Arctic policies and strategies in recent years. Ottawa's 2019 *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* marks at the very least a powerful, symbolic shift (and, potentially, as meaningful a substantive shift as well), as Arctic policy itself is now to be developed through a consultative process with the peoples of the Arctic, an indication that co-management has evolved beyond resource management into national policy formulation.

There is much reason to hope this collaborative dynamic between Arctic Indigenous peoples and states will endure amidst the reawakening of the Russian bear in world politics. As Dr. Lawson W. Brigham recently observed in the Wilson Center's Polar Institute blog, *Polar Points*, the smooth transfer of the chairmanship of the Council from Iceland to Russia "was warmly welcomed … from all the Arctic states and Permanent Participants. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov vowed to keep up the Council's spirit of cooperation and he reiterated the Council's shared vision that the 'Arctic is the territory of peace, stability and cooperation'" (Brigham, 2021). As Brigham points out, the "narrative most of the world hears today is that tension, potential military conflict, and resource races dominate the Arctic. The message in Iceland led by the members of the Arctic Council stands in stark contrast by reminding everyone that the Arctic remains one of the most peaceful places on Earth" (Brigham, 2021). And while "the Arctic is an integral part of the global security arena as it has been for the past seven decades," Brigham points out that "continued stability and close international cooperation are the cornerstones of a shared vision of the Arctic states" (Brigham, 2021) – and one may add, of the Arctic Indigenous peoples too, whose fates and futures are now intertwined with those of the Arctic states.

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