

## Briefing Note

# Incorporating North American Arctic Indigenous peoples and northern residents into regional security

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## Introduction

It is clear in late 2024 that the so-called *Peace Dividend* proclaimed by Prime Minister Thatcher and President Bush following the breakup of the Soviet Union failed to materialize (Hoagl, 1990). Worse for the northern regions, although controversial, the oft-mentioned concept of *Arctic exceptionalism*, wherein peaceful and cooperative relations between circumpolar nations are facilitated by the Arctic Council (Gjørv & Hodgson, 2019), also has not come to fruition. Following two decades of trying to cash in on the Peace Dividend and Arctic Exceptionalism, several of the Nordic countries are today unable to defend themselves after they decreased defense budgets, eliminated universal conscription, and reduced armed forces. The lack of Nordic security preparedness after Russia's invasion of Ukraine led Denmark, Iceland, and Norway to increase defense spending and caused Finland and Sweden to join NATO. In response to the Russian threat and the emergence of China in the Circumpolar Region, the U.S. reactivated the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division and established an Arctic defense center, both based in Alaska. Russia is building or reoccupying Arctic bases, creating new units, and establishing an Arctic strategic command. Arctic strategic bipolarity exists again like the Cold War. Yet, the situation is different now since the melting ice will soon allow grey-zone security threats (Atlantic Council, 2022) such as rogue (i.e., out of area) states, criminal organizations, and terrorist groups to operate in the region.

Since the Arctic Council excluded defense in its charter, making competition in the north for emerging territorial claims and natural resource acquisition a matter of conflict not cooperation, there is effectively no method for dealing with grey-zone threats such as border disputes (e.g., Lomonosov Ridge) or international criminal/terrorist activity except with military or police forces. That inability has contributed to decreased stability in the Arctic just when it is opening to anyone who wants to

operate there. To reduce grey-zone threats without resorting to a NATO Article 5 response requiring all members to come to the aid of a beleaguered comrade, some mechanism should be put into place to allow Arctic nations to retain their sovereignty and protect their populations in grey-zone threat situations. This paper argues that North American Arctic Council nations should assist their Permanent Participants, through their respective organizations like the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), in creating security structures that increase Indigenous peoples' contributions to confidence and stability-building in the north. For the purposes of this paper, the term Indigenous will be used, but the recommendation also covers traditional northern residents. Utilizing Arctic Indigenous peoples' capabilities to perform their traditional tasks adapted to security such as surveillance, communication, transportation, and survival, combined with training and support from their countries in limited security functions, could reduce dependence on militaries to protect the Arctic, increasing regional stability.

### **Lack of United States' North American Arctic Security Leadership**

The newly published Department of Defense Arctic Strategy illustrates that the U.S. government views the region as a strategic theatre linked to the defense of the homeland and other global-level operations such as freedom of navigation in international waters. The strategy outlines U.S. Arctic security as a "monitor-and-respond" capability that focuses on intelligence, allied cooperation, and global assets to protect the country's security (DoD 2024: 1). With it being a strategic and global asset, U.S. Arctic security operations exist to counter the People's Republic of China and Russia in the Arctic, with virtually no consideration to grey-zone security threats in Alaska. The exception is the U.S. Coast Guard, which does not have the ability to counter ground-based security threats. That strategy means the U.S. has no leadership role in North American Arctic grey-zone security, leaving Indigenous peoples and northern residents to deal with those threats on their own.

As further proof of its strategic orientation, in 2022 U.S. Army Headquarters Alaska was redesignated as the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division (Arctic). Despite activation of the division, according to inaugural commander General Eifler, during the past several decades, Alaskan-based troops lost their cold-weather capabilities as they trained to fight in, and deployed to, Middle Eastern deserts rather than preparing for cold-weather combat (Panella 2024). Regardless of assurances by the commanding general that the division was focused on the Arctic, activating the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division was greatest diversionary tactic since General Patton took command of the fictional First US Army Group to convince the Germans that Operation Overlord (i.e., D-Day) would come at Calais instead of Normandy. Yes, the 11<sup>th</sup>'s so-called "Arctic Angels" are making a great show of training in the Arctic by participating in NATO and Nordic exercises in Norway and other northern locations. However, if someone believes that the division is more likely to make a combat jump into Barrow, Iqaluit, or Longyearbyen instead of Taipei, Seoul, or Manila, then he or she ignores military history. The 11<sup>th</sup> was formed originally in 1943, moved to New Guinea to complete training, and then engaged in major Pacific combat operations in the Philippines, headed up Japanese occupation forces, fought in Korea, and was deactivated in 1968 as a strictly Pacific combat asset. As of this writing, a combat infantry company from the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division just landed on Shemya Island in the Aleutians, which was described by the current commanding general as "show of force following recent Russian and Chinese

military activity in the Arctic” (Warner, 2024). With U.S. defense policy focused on Chinese and Russian advances in the Pacific Area of Operations, it is easy to see that the real mission of the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division is strategic-level deterrence there!

The absence of U.S. Arctic security leadership is perhaps fortuitous due to the abysmal historical record of U.S. Arctic military operations. Despite the boldly (and erroneously) titled publication, *Regaining Arctic Dominance – the U.S. Army in the Arctic* (2019), the U.S. Army has never had Arctic dominance, shown by the service’s failure to staff, equip, and train units for Arctic combat (or even survival) during WWII. For example, American unpreparedness for Arctic operations was evident in 1941 as U.S. Marines took over from British forces that occupied Iceland to prevent a German invasion. The War Department sent Marines destined for the Caribbean to Iceland without cold weather uniforms, equipment, or training for Arctic operations. They were relieved by untrained and poorly equipped Army troops, who spent the war fighting to stay warm and survive the rigors of the Arctic winter. In Alaska, the 1943 attempt to retake the Aleutian Island of Attu was nothing short of a military disaster due to the U.S. Army’s unpreparedness for Arctic operations. The 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, which led the counterattack against 500 Japanese troops occupying the island, was untrained and poorly equipped for the frigid Arctic weather. While they retook Attu eventually, the Americans suffered more non-battle casualties attributed to weather, disease, and vehicle accidents than to combat. Although there was no combat when allied forces later reoccupied abandoned Kiska Island using elements of the American mountain division, the Army forces still suffered high casualties from accidents, disease, and weather. Five years after WWII, the Battle of Chosin Reservoir in Korea took place in frigid arctic conditions, which resulted in the virtual annihilation the Army’s 7<sup>th</sup> Division in what some call the worst defeat in American military history.

Thus, as seen through its Arctic security strategy, doctrine, and military history, the U.S. has no real leadership position among its North American Arctic partner nations in grey-zone operations (i.e., Canada, Denmark, and Iceland). That means all four countries must create structures utilizing Indigenous arctic peoples and northern residents as a first step to ensure grey-zone security in their own territories and in the Arctic region generally.

### **Indigenous Arctic peoples in previous North American security operations**

Although there are historical examples of Indigenous peoples serving in strategic-level military operations and fighting in convention warfare battles, for example the Saami and Nenets during WWII (e.g., Turunen et. Al. 2018; Dudeck 2018), that is not the type of security participation recommended here. Rather, the recommendation is that North American Arctic Indigenous peoples and northern residents possessing traditional knowledge and skills for survival, perhaps with military training as part of their national service, participate on a voluntary basis in grey-zone security activities supported by their host nations. The Alaskan Territorial Guard (ATG) during WWII (Figure 1; Heurlin n.d.) provides a suitable example of a security operation by Indigenous peoples and northern residents. Ranging in age from 12 to 80 years old, several thousand native Alaskans were recruited to become members of the ATG organized by two active-duty Army officers. After the 1942 invasion of Attu and Kiska, these militia members provided patrolling and surveillance for Alaskan frontier security, performing other tasks like deception operations and establishing remote supply depots. ATG troops

received minimal Army training near their villages including weapons familiarization and communication procedures to enhance their Indigenous arctic survival and mobility skills (Kimmons, 2017; Eifler & Hardy, 2023).



**Figure 1.** Recruiting poster for the Alaska Territorial Guard. Heurlin, n.d. Used with permission from the University of Alaska Museum of the North.

Although the ATG was disbanded in 1947, later the Alaskan legislature authorized creation of the Eskimo Scouts as a militia associated with the Alaskan National Guard (a federal entity), but without pay or formal training. In 1951 the scouts received their first formal field training at Fort Richardson. Although paid minimally for part-time service, the scouts and their families were so dedicated that villages held charity events to supplement their pay. Some scouts eventually received training at Fort Bragg (now called Fort Liberty) from Army Special Forces (i.e., Green Berets) troops in basic soldiering skills like map reading, but also in guerilla tactics behind enemy lines. At the same time, since Special Forces soldiers must be prepared to operate in any climatic conditions, the Eskimo Scouts provided cold-weather survival and mobility training to the Green Berets. Many Indigenous family members continue the legacy of the scouts today by serving in the Alaskan National Guard, where they receive individual training and are prepared to enlist if the Eskimo Scouts are ever reactivated (Kimmons, 2017).

Like Canada today (as described below), Alaska had its own federal rangers, when a Ranger Company consisting of Active Component troops was stationed at Fort Richardson from August 1970 until September 1972. Company O, 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (Ranger) was created by the commander of U.S. Army Alaska using experienced officers from Ranger units that formed Long Range Reconnaissance

Patrols (LLRP) in Vietnam. Many of the Ranger units stood up during the latter stages of the conflict in Indochina were being disbanded or returned to the states and there was Department of the Army discussion about what type of Ranger units should exist in the future and how they should be utilized (Harrison, 2024).

Based on recommendations by officers assigned to Alaska, and supported by general officers at the Pentagon, the Army used both ranger-qualified and newly recruited personnel to form the new unit, informally referred to as “The Arctic Rangers.” The Arctic Rangers’ mission was to perform long range reconnaissance patrols in the sparsely populated Alaskan north during the Cold War to protect the nation from strategic threats, especially a ground attack by Russia. Subordinate tasks included protecting the Alaskan Pipeline, performing search and rescue duties especially to recover downed aircrews, and showing the flag to ensure the sovereignty of the decade-old Alaskan state. Importantly the Arctic Rangers trained with former Eskimo Scouts members who continued to perform their previously assigned duties voluntarily without compensation. The Alaskan Rangers, numbering approximately 336 troops, created training and tested equipment for Arctic conditions, and was just beginning to establish itself as an elite unit when it was disbanded. That began a pattern of relative neglect of security in America’s Arctic region that continued for the next half century (Harrison, 2024).

### **North American Arctic security in Canada, Denmark (Greenland), and Iceland**

World War II made Canada a strategic military power, allowing it to build one of the world’s largest militaries composed of an army, navy, and air force, with over a million troops under arms (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2020). Yet it was decided that military troops were not enough to ensure complete defense and security for the Canadian Arctic; rather, a combination of mobile force and frontier scouts was necessary to retain sovereignty over their northern territories. This resulted in a security force involving both regular army paratrooper units called the Mobile Striking Force and a type of reserve home guard named the Canadian Rangers. The Canadian Rangers are northern residents (mostly Inuit) who live in the arctic countryside, survive its hardships, provide reconnaissance, and protect themselves if necessary (Coates et al., 2008).

The key to understanding Canada’s use of Indigenous peoples in security operations is contained in its *Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy* (Government of Canada, 2010). The policy requires increased government monitoring and security in the country’s Arctic region, consisting of Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Yukon. The sparsely populated area comprises 40% of Canada’s land mass, 75% of its coastline, and includes 36,000 islands, presenting a challenge to monitor given that it is without roads or railroads. The immense mission of ensuring Canadian sovereignty requires not only meeting strategic security threats, but includes grey-zone threats like terrorists, criminals, and others who might use violence to achieve their goals. Those threats would be countered by the civil authorities, law enforcement, and the armed forces. Importantly, the country’s security posture includes the Canadian Rangers made up primarily of native and northern residents (Government of Canada 2010).

Today’s Canadian Rangers began their history as the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers (PCMR) formed in 1942 amid invasion worries following Japan’s occupation of the Aleutian Islands. The militia members

were unable to perform regular military service due to age or essential-occupation status. In the PCMR they received training, a rifle, and a uniform, but were required to be self-sustaining. The main PCMR tasks were to use their local members' knowledge of terrain, settlement locations, and subsistence activities to report to their higher headquarters any events like suspicious maritime act or overland travel by strangers. While the PCMR disbanded in 1945, today's Canadian Rangers owe their ancestry to them (Lackenbauer, 2013).

The Canadian Rangers were created in 1947 and their approximately 5,000 members are part of the nation's Army Reserve forces. Although many are Indigenous peoples, the rangers have a mixed ethnic makeup depending upon their locations, and non-native northern residents can take part. The rangers receive annual military training and are stationed near their local communities. Members are issued a rifle, clothing (e.g., red sweatshirts that identify them), and other equipment, but are expected to use their own transportation means for which they are reimbursed. The members are paid for performing duty and training according to their rank and status as Reservists, although some rangers at headquarters have active-duty positions. Rangers are organized into five patrol groups (CRPG), assigned to an active or reserve Army division, and responsible for patrolling their unique regions. Each CRPG consists of a headquarters unit commanded by a lieutenant colonel, patrol companies headed by a captain, and patrol groups of thirty members led by a sergeant. Patrol groups are assigned a specific area with members coming from local villages (Government of Canada, 2011).

Canadian Rangers conduct surveillance operations by patrolling North Warning sites in their area of responsibility, observing strangers, and reporting suspicious activity. When so tasked, ranger units provide training to regular military troops in Arctic survival and mobility skills. During arctic emergencies or exercises performed by southern-based troops, Canadian Rangers act as guides or advisors to civilian and military responders, and participate in search and rescue operations. Rangers also generally "show the flag" in their local communities by providing instruction and mentoring to the Junior Canadian Rangers and by supporting important national and local holidays. Except for personal protection measures, the Canadian Rangers would not engage in direct combat with enemy troops or other grey-zone threats. Therefore, CRPGs do not possess automatic or anti-armor weapons (Government of Canada, 2011). Still, the rangers' structure, organization, and primary missions represent a current example for North American grey-zone security forces. At the other end of the spectrum of native Arctic militia groups is the elite, active-duty Danish naval unit called the Sirius Sled Patrol (*Slædepatruljen Sirius*) that operates in uninhabited northern and eastern Greenland. As an important part of the Danish Kingdom's sovereignty mission in the North Atlantic, the Sirius Sled Patrol is fully capable of operating for months without direct support, relying on pre-positioned supply depots and shelter in the remote Arctic landscape. The entire unit consists of twelve volunteers who have undergone extreme testing and training to survive and navigate in the Arctic, with six first-year members joining six second-year veterans annually. All sled patrol members spend most of their two-year tour patrolling mostly in the Northeast Greenland National Park. Each patrol team consists of two sailors accompanied by as many as fourteen sled dogs. The patrols perform military surveillance, policing, game and fish warden duties, support research expeditions and cruise ships, take climatic observations (i.e., ice thickness), and assist in search and rescue (Forsvaret 2024). Like the U.S. Navy's Underwater Demolition Teams (i.e., SEALs) without the scuba diving capability, Sirius Sled Patrol

teams are fully capable of engaging threats militarily using direct action (i.e., conventional combat). They are heavily armed with personal weapons and capable of attacking small-scale threats or even providing support to regular armed forces during larger conflicts.

Unlike the Sled Patrol, direct action missions against Arctic grey-zone threats are not suitable for Indigenous militias or security patrols, for which they are not trained or equipped. Recently, however, many native Greenlanders have received military training by serving conscription periods with Danish armed forces, and those former service members could provide the basis for an Inuit security patrol unit. Additionally, two recent changes to the Greenlandic self-governing responsibilities related to increasing autonomy could provide the legal basis for forming a security force comprised of Indigenous peoples. First, following a referendum on self-determination in 2008, an agreement was signed with Denmark to allow the Greenlandic government to take a larger role in foreign affairs and defense (originally retained by Denmark along with currency and postage). That larger defense role involved Greenland taking control of the coast guard there and assuming a command role in policing operations including the patrol boat crews that are trained and equipped to support Arctic military operations (Statsministeriet n.d.). Second, in 2024, the first cohort of 22 members enlisted in the Arctic Basic Education course offered by the Joint Arctic Command in Nuuk. The course will be held in Greenland, with classes covering Indigenous Arctic knowledge mostly taught in Greenlandic, that when combined with Danish military subjects, will prepare the new soldiers to perform their duty in Greenland. According to the Arctic command, the new opportunity has generated much interest among young Inuit for serving in the military, which had fallen to a low-level following Denmark's 2019 elimination of the conscription of Greenlanders. Although the intent is for Greenlanders receiving the Arctic Basic Education to support and serve with Danish armed forces for training or in an emergency, the capability will soon exist for a Greenlandic Ranger organization to be formed to conduct grey-zone security tasks while performing their day-to-day activities in the self-governing, autonomous region (Ellekrog 2024).

Because much of Iceland is located on the North American Continent, I include the country in this discussion. However, there are no Indigenous peoples in Iceland, so the northern residents must take control of their own security, which they have not yet accomplished. I have declared elsewhere that I believe Iceland's failure to provide for its own security against grey-zone threats should result in the country's removal from NATO (Wheelerburg 2022). If Iceland is to remain in NATO, it must establish its own security force and use the programs available to alliance members that help countries by providing training, equipment, and weapons. While the politicians, especially those from the anti-military parties like the Left-Green and Socialist Parties, have controlled much of the country's foreign policy recently, Iceland's citizens traditionally supported an anti-military stance. A 2016 survey revealed that nearly 45% of Iceland's population did not know they were in a military alliance (the number was 50% for those respondents under 30; Ómarsdóttir 2018). But after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Figure 2), a 2022 survey revealed nearly three-quarters of respondents were in favor of the country remaining in NATO although there was some variation based on political party. Regardless of the differences, nearly half of Left-Green and Socialist Party members responded in the 2022 survey that they wanted to remain in NATO (Ledbetter, 2022).



**Figure 2.** Goodbye Arctic Exceptionalism! Russian Ambassador's Residence in Reykjavik splattered with red paint following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, October 2022. Photography by Robert Wheelersburg.

Without legitimate security forces, the country has continued the process of militarizing its police (much to the consternation of its citizens) by arming them with automatic weapons and assigning them inappropriate missions like anti-terrorism operations or diplomatic security. Such inappropriate missions are plain to see. While attending Arctic Circle in 2022, to which most Icelanders pay scant attention, I watched Crown Prince Haakon of Norway being surrounded by a dozen Icelandic motorcycle cops leaving Harpa Concert Hall, with crowds of Icelanders gawking at the scene not knowing who was being protected. Recently, Icelandic Police pepper sprayed pro-Palestinian demonstrators who were supposedly blocking government ministers from meeting; however, that claim is disputed (Fontaine, 2024). The 2024 G-7 summit in Reykjavik marked a significant change in Icelandic security policy. In time for the summit two days later, a June 22, 2024 amendment to the Icelandic Police Act No. 95/2024 allowed foreign police to carry weapons to provide security for international events or as bodyguards for foreign leaders (Alþing 2024). Regardless of the militarization of the police and allowing foreign police to be armed, Iceland is woefully unprepared to provide for its own security. For example, the coast guard's only long-distance surveillance airplane, SF-TIF (a Saab 340a), is currently grounded indefinitely to repair its engines, leaving the country without sufficient advance threat warning using its own capabilities (Pomrenke 2024a). Since to date NATO member countries have provided approximately \$50 billion to Ukraine to fight against Russian aggression, Iceland could certainly request that the treaty organization provide it with two C-130 Hercules aircraft and fund their maintenance.

Iceland took the first step toward achieving its own security when Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir resigned and was subsequently defeated in the 2024 presidential campaign. In 2018, Jakobsdóttir refused to tour an American aircraft carrier visiting Iceland, despite other ministers doing so, citing her



party's stance that Iceland should withdraw from NATO (Kyzer 2018; Gibson 2022). As a member of the anti-military Left-Greens Party that held only a few seats, Jakobsdóttir had no legitimate claim to be the leader of her country. Recent polling suggests that the Left Greens may lose their seats in the Alþing, which would benefit Iceland's future security posture (Pomrenke 2024b). Today most Icelanders want to be a member of NATO and there is no real political opposition toward doing so. It is time for the country to assume its own security instead of using hired guns like the Americans or Canadians who have provided past grey-zone security. If Iceland does not want to "join" NATO as a full member able to defend itself, the alliance can find another airfield or just pay rent for the one the U.S. built originally at Keflavik. I have outlined a plan to create such a security force using existing search and rescue capabilities and adding a volunteer reserve component (Wheelerburg 2022).

## Conclusion

Northern American Arctic grey-zone security is in its formative stages, using militias and reserve forces comprised of Indigenous peoples and northern residents. Currently, only Canada possesses the capability to adequately protect its population and retain its sovereignty in its Arctic from such grey-zone threats using non-military forces. Denmark is taking steps to support the Greenlandic government's efforts to protect its own territory against rogue states, terrorists, and criminals. Using its Inuit people, perhaps with the Sirius Patrol providing training and logistical support, Greenland could achieve its own grey-zone security. Iceland has no security above the police and coast guard. NATO members should require the country to create a security force using trained and armed reservists, perhaps recruited from the existing search and rescue units. The U.S. is also unprepared to deal with grey-zone security threats in its Arctic region despite the presence of the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division there. America should create a new Alaskan Rangers that is comprised of Indigenous peoples and northern residents. If the Northern American Arctic countries develop grey-zone security forces in autonomous regions like Nunavut or Greenland and in sovereign territories in America and Iceland, the Arctic Council's Permanent Observers could begin to influence stability and confidence building in the Circumpolar region without relying on military forces or NATO's Article 5. Such a security situation could limit the circumstances that lead to actual combat or all-out warfare in the North American Arctic.

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