

Briefing Note

Recent Canadian Northern Indigenous Peoples' Sovereignty, Security, and Defence Strategies

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Zachary Zimmermann, and Samuel Pallaq Huyer

Several Canadian Indigenous organizations have released recent strategies and reports on Arctic sovereignty and security, all of which share a common theme: there can be no Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic without respect for Indigenous rights-holders and leadership in agenda setting and decision making. In June 2025, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) released An Inuit Vision for Arctic Sovereignty, Security and Defence, which highlights the need for Inuit perspectives to be central to Canada's national security efforts and calls on the Government of Canada to prioritize human security in its defence planning. In September 2025, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) and the Government of Nunavut (GN) released the Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Strategy, which outlines five pillars for a secure and sovereign Nunavut that also emphasize human security; the importance of nation-building infrastructure projects to reduce supply chain vulnerabilities, support national security, and unlock economic opportunities; and the need for sustained investment in community-based security. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Yukon Region report on Yukon First Nations Defence and Security, released in August 2025, reiterates that Indigenous Peoples must be acknowledged and treated as essential decision-making partners in Arctic defence and security, offering specific recommendations to the federal government on how to improve information sharing, co-planning, and funding for defence and security initiatives. These documents advocate for a holistic view of security that includes community well-being, economic prosperity, and the environment, in addition to traditional military defence.

P. Whitney Lackenbauer is Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in the Study of the Canadian North and a Professor in the School for the Study of Canada, Trent University, Canada, and the network lead of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN).

Zachary Zimmermann, born in Inuvik, NWT, and raised in Whitehorse, Yukon, is a Master's student in the Canadian Studies and Indigenous Studies program at Trent University and a research fellow with NAADSN.

Samuel Pallaq Huyer, a Netsilik Inuk from Gjoa Haven, Nunavut, is a Master's student in the Canadian Studies and Indigenous Studies program at Trent University and a research fellow with NAADSN.

Introduction

As the Government of Canada has updated its defence and foreign policies related to the Arctic in the last two years,¹ Indigenous rightsholders in that country have responded. Recent position papers or strategies released in 2025 by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) in collaboration with the Government of Nunavut, and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Yukon Region share a core message: Canada's Arctic sovereignty is inseparable from the sovereignty, security, and well-being of the Indigenous peoples who inhabit the region. While generally compatible with state messaging, these documents challenge the Government of Canada to move beyond traditional national defence to embrace a more holistic, collaborative or Indigenous-led approach that respects and enables their roles as active partners in, and not passive subjects of, security.

The visions articulated in all three documents are grounded in Indigenous rights to traditional territories and activities therein. As the national Inuit advocacy organization based in Ottawa, ITK claims a voice on behalf of Inuit as the original peoples of Inuit Nunangat—the Inuit homeland in Canada.² Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporation (NTI), representing the Inuit beneficiaries of the Nunavut Agreement, coordinates and manages Inuit responsibilities set out in that Crown-Inuit treaty and ensures that the federal and territorial governments fulfill their obligations.³ The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Yukon Region works with all fourteen Yukon First Nations (YFNs) to support advancing their priorities and interest on a national level.⁴

ITK: An Inuit Vision for Arctic Sovereignty, Security and Defence

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami released its position paper *An Inuit Vision for Arctic Sovereignty, Security and Defence* in June 2025. Declaring that “Inuit are proud Canadians” (p. 3), the document chastizes the Government of Canada for what it characterizes as costly mistakes of the past, extols the strengths and knowledge that Inuit bring to this nation-building discussion, and highlights the need to recognize the “importance of human security to national security” (p. 3).

This call to action is rooted in the core thesis that “Inuit sovereignty is Canada’s sovereignty,” and that a secure and prosperous Arctic is impossible without a direct partnership with Inuit and significant investment in Inuit Nunangat (p. 3). The report states unreservedly that “Canada trails all other Arctic States in developing its Arctic territory, exposing our country to security threats, sovereignty violations, and foreign interference” (p. 3).

This paper reiterates a longstanding position articulated by ITK presidents, including now-Governor General Mary May Simon,⁵ that Canada must adopt a broader and deeper vision of Arctic security than a narrow, militaristic or military-centric view. Instead, it posits that national security in the Arctic is inextricably linked to human security: the welfare and prosperity of the Inuit people and their communities (p. 3). By investing in essential infrastructure and services, and by empowering Inuit through direct partnerships and self-determination, ITK articulates a vision whereby Canada improve Arctic security by placing Inuit welfare first and enacting “a more ambitious vision” (p. 9).

ITK’s human security focus is rooted in its view that Inuit play a unique and vital role in the Canadian Arctic. Inuit Nunangat, which constitutes 40% of Canada’s land area and 72% of its coastline, is home

to 51 Inuit communities that serve as hubs for monitoring vast terrestrial and marine areas, including the Northwest Passage (pp. 3, 5). Inuit hunters, harvesters, and researchers are described as the "eyes and ears" on the ground, providing invaluable, in-kind support to the "thin ranks of Canadian Coast Guard and Canadian Armed Forces personnel in the region (p. 3).

Ironically, ITK fails to even acknowledge the Canadian Rangers, a component of the Canadian Armed Forces Reserves that has a patrol in practically every Inuit community as is predominantly comprised of Inuit in Inuit Nunangat. This is a remarkable omission given that they are mentioned in greater detail in ITK's report on marine policy:

Inuit have a long-standing relationship with the Canadian Armed Forces through the Canadian Rangers, in place since the late 1940s. Inuit members of the Canadian Rangers routinely participate in the Operation NANOOK annual exercises of the Canadian Armed Forces, which recognize that with increasing vessel traffic comes the need to bolster Canada's capacity to respond to Inuit Nunangat's increasing marine safety and security needs. The expanding role of the CCGA [Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary] in the Arctic should complement the maritime role of the Canadian Rangers, as well as local hunters and trappers organizations and associations—or local ground [search and rescue (SAR)] teams in Inuit Nunangat—along with Inuit communities whose pivotal role in local SAR and maritime domain awareness operations too often goes unrecognized. Given the long-standing contributions of the Canadian Rangers to Inuit Nunangat's maritime domain awareness and the increasing role of the CCGA in Inuit communities, there is an increasing need to coordinate and improve their interoperability so that they can work together during emergencies.

Why ITK would choose to avoid any comparable discussion in a report specifically about security and defence is peculiar, marginalizing the proud service of more than a thousand Inuit in the Canadian Rangers, which means that Inuit living in small communities serve in the Canadian Armed Forces at a far higher average per capita than Canadians as a whole.⁶ Furthermore, the Rangers' role in community resilience seems an ideal example of the comprehensive approach and human security-centric narrative promoted in *An Inuit Vision for Arctic Sovereignty, Security and Defence*.⁷

The ITK report stresses that, despite their essential role, Inuit communities face significant social and economic inequities caused by a historic lack of infrastructure (p. 3). The report cites limited telecommunications and "ageing or non-existent transportation infrastructure, such as ports, harbours [*sic*], and paved runways" as prime examples of this chronic deficit (p. 3). This underdevelopment makes the region difficult and expensive to access and monitor, while also forcing communities to rely on foreign satellite technology for basic connectivity (pp. 3, 10). The document also expresses alarm at Canada's "muted response" to increasing shipping traffic and a growing presence of foreign actors seeking to assert influence in the Inuit homeland (p. 3).

The report warns against repeating the mistakes of the past, specifically citing the militarization of the Arctic during the Second World War and its negative consequences for Inuit (p. 4). Peculiarly, the major infrastructure projects that it references – the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line – was

constructed in the 1950s, not the 1940s. Instead, the position paper might have pointed to the disruptive influence of the arrival of US Army Air Forces in the area around Frobisher Bay (now Iqaluit) during and immediately after the Second World War that Mélanie Gagnon described based on oral histories with thirty-three Inuit Elders.⁸ In any case, the narrative that ITK constructs stitches the Canadian military into a broader teleology of oppression, suggesting that it preceded destructive colonial policies such as forced relocations of Inuit families and the slaughter of sled dogs, which it alleges were both intended to bolster Canada's sovereignty claims at the expense of its people (p. 4). While these narratives are now political mainstream, a recent systematic study suggests that the notion that the Government of Canada used Inuit as "human flagpoles" for sovereignty is not grounded in verifiable evidence from the time of actual High Arctic relocations but instead became an instrumental political narrative much later.⁹ The fact that this "human flagpole" idea factors so heavily into both the ITK and NTI/GN strategies speaks to its sedimentation in Canadian political discourse.

The document also points to specific geopolitical vulnerabilities that are exposed by Canada's underinvestment in the Arctic. First, it emphasizes how Russia has invested heavily in its Arctic territory and is partnering with China to increase shipping along its Northern Sea Route (NSR) at a level that already dwarfs the number of transits through the Canadian Northwest Passage (p. 7). It is doubtful, however, that Inuit leadership really wants Canada to emulate the Russians in their approach to building transportation arteries or in their treatment of their Indigenous Peoples.¹⁰ By holding up transit traffic in the NSR to suggest that Russia is ahead of Canada, ITK intimates that Inuit desire more international shipping in their waters – as long as Inuit stewardship is the foundation of adaptive and integrated marine management.¹¹ This is a clearer position than Inuit leadership often presents, given deep-seated concerns about the impacts of shipping on ecosystems and communities.

ITK also calls out China's exploitation of infrastructure deficits in the Arctic as "strategic footholds to exert influence" (p. 7). The report provides examples of Chinese state-owned companies attempting to acquire critical infrastructure in Greenland and an important gold mine complex in Nunavut, demonstrating a pattern of foreign interests seeking to exploit Canadian vulnerabilities (p. 7). The document, however, does not specifically reference the active Chinese-owned mine in Nunavik or the majority Chinese state-owned company MMG Resources' possession of Nunavut's Izok and High Lake zinc, lead and copper deposits.¹² Instead, it prioritizes mentioning by name the failed bid by the Chinese state-owned Shandong Gold Group to purchase the Hope Bay mine in 2020. ITK also downplays the effectiveness of Canada and the other like-minded Arctic states in blocking pernicious Chinese acquisitions over the last decade, including the invocation of national security provisions to do so.¹³ Nevertheless, this position paper offers the clearest affirmation to date that Inuit in Canada are attentive to risks and threats posed by Chinese investment and research activities in Inuit Nunangat.

Given the timing of the position paper, the inclusion of the United States in the context of rising geopolitical uncertainty and risk should come as no surprise. The document highlights the longstanding sovereignty dispute between Canada and the US over the Northwest Passage, which the US does not recognize as Canada's historic internal waters (p. 7). "The Northwest Passage is part of Inuit Nunangat, our Arctic homeland," Monica Ell-Kanayuk, the President of Inuit Circumpolar

Canada, affirmed in 2019. “Canada’s sovereignty is based on treaties and constructive agreements which recognize both Inuit sovereignty and Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic, including the Northwest Passage.”¹⁴ ITK and other Inuit organizations’ position on the issue aligns with Canada’s legal stance, which is grounded in the continuous Inuit use and occupation of the waters and sea ice for thousands of years.

An Inuit Vision for Arctic Sovereignty, Security and Defence also notes the US Government Accountability Office’s inquiry into how much it would cost to take over Greenland, citing the Kingdom of Denmark’s “underinvestment in its economic and military security” as an example of “how vulnerable Inuit Nunangat and Canada may be to foreign interference and coercion if the federal government does not invest more in Inuit and bring the region into the rest of the country” (p. 6). By not disavowing the Trump Administration’s narrative, this could be read as an unexpected foray by a Canadian Inuit organization into commenting on Greenlandic affairs – without highlighting Greenlanders’ insistence that they reject Trump’s overtures and threats and do not want to become part of the US. Nevertheless, ITK seeks to illustrate that Canada’s historic neglect of Inuit Nunangat has created an environment where foreign actors can exploit inequities to assert their own interests, such as by prohibiting further development of the Arctic or using cyber-attacks to exploit vulnerabilities in the region’s technology infrastructure (p. 7).

To counter these threats and build a secure, prosperous Arctic, the document outlines six key priorities that must form the foundation of Canada’s national security policy in the Arctic:

1. *Secure the region through Inuit-Crown Partnership:* The position paper emphasizes that Canada’s greatest asset is its unique, direct working relationship with an Arctic Indigenous people (p. 8). The Inuit-Crown Partnership Committee (ICPC), established in 2017, is identified as a pivotal mechanism for information sharing and developing effective policies based on Inuit expertise (p. 8). The document urges continued federal engagement in the ICPC to advance shared priorities and strengthen Canada’s position as a powerful Arctic state (p. 8).
2. *Invest in Inuit prosperity to improve Arctic security:* The report challenges a security approach that is narrowly focused on increasing military presence. It argues that the most tangible threats to Arctic security are foreign influence and interference, economic sabotage, and the growing inequities between Inuit Nunangat and the rest of Canada. Therefore, Arctic security measures must prioritize closing gaps in health, education, and social services that compel many families to leave the region, alongside more effective policies to reduce hunger and the high cost of living (p. 9).
3. *Bring Inuit Nunangat into Canada:* The document advocates for a more ambitious vision for developing the region and integrating its infrastructure and economy into the rest of the country. It calls for an aggressive fiscal policy focused on regional development, rather than “one-off,” project-based development. This includes “preparing now for the new Arctic future, including by developing sea lanes and other supporting infrastructure throughout the Northwest Passage that will be needed to meet increasing shipping demands” (p. 9).

4. *Invest directly in Inuit:* ITK insists that the federal government's long-standing practice of deferring to provincial and territorial jurisdictions, rather than investing more boldly in a distinctions-based approach with Inuit, has caused Canada to “fall behind all other Arctic States” (p. 9). To accelerate change and improve prosperity, the report proposes direct federal investments in Inuit Treaty Organizations and new legislative and policy approaches that support greater Inuit self-determination over areas like education, healthcare, and housing (p. 9) – longstanding priorities raised by ITK at the Inuit Crown Partnership Committee.
5. *Ensure defence infrastructure investments benefit Inuit:* This directly connects to the Government of Canada's national defence and security agenda, referencing Canada's April 2024 Defence Policy Update, *Our North Strong and Free*, which commits to modernizing NORAD and investing in dual-use infrastructure (p. 10). While welcoming this focus, the ITK report stresses that the concept of dual-use infrastructure must be expanded to genuinely benefit Inuit communities. Accordingly, ITK insists that defence spending priorities should be on closing the infrastructure gap in Inuit Nunangat by supporting projects that include housing, new ports, harbours, and docks, fibre connectivity, and climate change-resistant runways and sea lanes (p. 10). This vision resonates with the NATO Defence Investment Pledge in June 2025, in which Prime Minister Mark Carney agreed to dedicate an additional 1.5% of Canada's GDP to investments in critical defence and security-related expenditure, such as new airports, ports, telecommunication, emergency preparedness systems, and other dual-use investments which serve defence as well as civilian readiness.¹⁵
6. *Address vulnerabilities in foreign interference:* The report concludes by highlighting the “vulnerable and awkward position” of Inuit leaders, who have been warned by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) about foreign adversaries offering to fill the infrastructure gaps, yet have not been provided a clear alternative or sufficient investment from Canada itself (p. 10). This leaves Inuit reliant on foreign technology, such as Space X's Starlink, because Canada has failed to improve connectivity through domestic providers (p. 10). ITK ends with a poignant call on the federal government to work with Inuit to ensure, in the interests of national security, that they are not forced to shoulder the burden of having to decline partnerships with foreign actors that could otherwise support diversified economic development in Inuit Nunangat (p. 10).

While ITK's short position paper is light on details about conventional security and defence issues, and offers less detail than its report on Inuit Nunangat marine policy priorities and recommendation, the national Inuit advocacy organization provides a framework to rationalize its participation in Arctic sovereignty, security, and defence agenda setting, and to promote its human security focus and the need for infrastructure. "We don't have the essential infrastructure to interact with Canada in the way that just about every other Canadian community can interact with one another," ITK President Natan Obed explained in an interview on CBC News in April 2025. "So, there's this great opportunity to bolster Arctic sovereignty to show Canada's commitment to the world for the Arctic by improving the lives and the infrastructure for Canadian Inuit."¹⁶ This agenda is clear in *An Inuit Vision for Arctic Sovereignty, Security and Defence*, as well as a subsequent report released by Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. and the Government of Nunavut.

Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Strategy

In May 2025, the Nunavut Partnership Committee (NPC) – which consists of the Executive Council of the Government of Nunavut (GN) and the Board of Directors of Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) – endorsed two new workplans with a strategic focus on Infrastructure and Arctic Sovereignty and Security pursuant to the two organizations' 2022 Nunavut Partnership Declaration. "Our shared goal must remain the full and fair implementation of the *Nunavut Agreement*, which not only safeguards Inuit rights but also serves as a foundation for reconciliation, Arctic sovereignty, and security which is based on Inuit historical and continuous use and occupancy," NTI President Jeremy Tunraluk explained. "These two new workplans are designed to enhance Arctic infrastructure that will improve Inuit livelihoods and also significantly advance Canada's national interests by reinforcing Arctic sovereignty and unlocking economic potential in Nunavut."¹⁷ Guided by the principle of *Piliriqatigijinniq* – working together for the common good – the GN and NTI convened the Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Summit in Iqaluit in June 2025, which brought together a diverse group of leaders, experts, community members, and youth to explore and define a "unified vision for Nunavut's Arctic sovereignty rooted in the values, priorities, and lived realities of Nunavummiut."¹⁸

The ensuing *Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Strategy*,¹⁹ released two months later, offers the central message that "there can be no Arctic sovereignty without Inuit security" (p. 2). It defines sovereignty not as an abstract military or state interest, but as the lived reality of Inuit, encompassing their well-being, culture, and self-determination (p. 10). "Inuit have always been the foundation of Canada's presence in the Arctic. There is no Canadian sovereignty without Inuit security," NTI President Jeremy Tunraluk emphasized. "This strategy is clear that sovereignty in the Arctic must be guided by Inuit-led priorities."²⁰ The strategy is presented as a "living" document, grounded in the principle of self-determination and Inuit-led governance (pp. 7, 20).

A set of core principles guide the Nunavummiut approach to sovereignty and security. The first is Inuit self-determination. Sovereignty is defined by the ability of Inuit to make decisions for their communities, in their homeland, and on their own terms. This is a right affirmed by international instruments like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and protected under Canadian law (pp. 11, 26). Second is human security. For Nunavummiut, security is a lived reality tied to essential needs: safe homes, food security, clean water, healthcare, and economic

opportunity (p. 10). It also includes the protection of the environment, cultural integrity, and language (pp. 3, 16). The third element is that Inuit represent presence with purpose. The GN/NTI strategy rejects a narrow definition of sovereignty that uses Inuit as “human flagpoles” to assert Canada's claims, as it alleges was the case with forced relocations of Inuit families in the 1940s and 1950s. Instead, it advocates for a sovereignty that is rooted in the lived experiences, knowledge, and leadership of Inuit who have lived in their Arctic homeland for millennia (p. 9). Last, but not least, the strategy emphasizes that the *Nunavut Agreement* is the only treaty between the Government of Canada and an Indigenous People that explicitly references sovereignty, recognizing Inuit as “essential” to establishing it (p. 10). Accordingly, Inuit are rightsholders, not passive participants or mere stakeholders, in the making of Arctic policy (pp. 20, 35).

The *Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Strategy* is organized around five interconnected pillars that form the basis for its understanding of Arctic sovereignty and security (pp. 6, 12):

1. *Strong and Resilient Communities:* This pillar calls for sustained investment to address chronic housing shortages, inadequate healthcare access, and food insecurity (pp. 15-17) in Nunavut. It also identifies reliable, Canadian-owned connectivity as a critical component of modern nation-building that enhances community well-being and security and reduces reliance on foreign technologies (p. 17). The strategy also calls for expanding community-based programs that contribute to domain awareness, defence, and security, particularly the Inuit Guardians and Canadian Rangers, and for more investments in emergency preparedness (p. 18).
2. *Nunavut Perspectives on Arctic Sovereignty and Security:* This pillar focuses on Inuit-led governance and self-determination as the foundation of sovereignty, and stresses that a lack of infrastructure is the “single greatest barrier to achieving true local, territorial, and national security” (p. 20). The strategy calls for the Government of Canada to support Inuit self-determination as the “cornerstone of Arctic governance, ensuring that Inuit make decisions rather than simply agreeing to decisions made elsewhere,” and for infrastructure development to be Inuit-led and Inuit-driven (p. 21). It also recommends expanding and strengthening the Canadian Rangers and other programs that “maintain operational readiness and integrate Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and practices into training, operations, and local emergency preparedness efforts” (p. 21).
3. *Nunavut in the Circumpolar World:* The strategy highlights Nunavut's central role in the circumpolar world due to shared cultural, linguistic, and familial ties with Inuit in other countries, and positions Inuit as a “bridge between Canada and other Arctic nations,” fostering cooperation and collaboration in international fora (p. 23). The document also emphasizes the need for defence infrastructure (such as airstrips, ports, harbours, roads, and communication and electrical networks) that is multi-use and designed to serve both military and community needs (p. 24).
4. *Unlocking Nunavut's Economic Potential:* This pillar states that economic inequality weakens communities, and that Arctic sovereignty cannot be achieved without sustainable economic self-determination for Inuit (p. 26). It advocates for a shift from a reliance on southern

workforces and resource extraction to Inuit-led development that creates meaningful employment, local capacity, and ownership stakes in major projects (pp. 26-27).

5. *Climate Change Adaptation and Environmental Impacts*: This pillar addresses the profound implications of climate change for Inuit security and Canadian sovereignty, highlighting how melting ice is increasing geopolitical interest and foreign activities in the region (p. 29). The strategy calls for adaptation and resiliency rooted in Inuit self-determination, combining traditional knowledge (*Inuit Qanijimajatuqangit*) with modern approaches (p. 29). Once again, it advocates for greater investment in the Inuit Guardians and Canadian Rangers, who are described as “a potent force, and a model of how Inuit knowledge, skills and Inuit stewardship build true resilience in communities, strengthening Canada's sovereignty” (p. 29). It also pushes for a transition away from diesel dependency to clean, locally-produced alternative energy solutions (p. 30).

Like the ITK position paper, the *Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Strategy* intends to serve as a clarion call to action for Nunavummiut and their partners to take decisive steps to safeguard their well-being, strengthen Canada's claim to jurisdiction, and ensure that Inuit voices lead in the national and circumpolar dialogue (p. 34). Offering more specific detail than the ITK document, it articulates a human-centric (and Inuit-centric) approach to sovereignty and security. Although the lines between “security” and “well-being” are not always clear, the spirit of partnership, co-development, and resilience is readily apparent.

Yukon First Nations Defence and Security: Prioritizing Sovereignty, Preparedness, and Partnership

In February 2023, a high-altitude object (which later turned out to be a hobbyist balloon originating from the northern continental United States) was shot down by the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) over the Yukon. This action represented the first kinetic action that NORAD had taken in defence of North America, yet it also highlighted lapses in communication and engagement with the Yukon First Nations (YFN) upon whose traditional territories the kinetic action and the ensuing ground search were conducted.²¹ This incident also served as the impetus for YFN leadership to task the AFN regional office with conducting an in-depth study on defence and security in the Yukon.²² In partnership with the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN), AFN Yukon Region hosted six “open house” sessions with YFN leaders, Elders, community members, and external subject matter experts on specific themes relating to the defence and security space in late 2024 and early 2025. Subsequently, AFN Yukon Region, in partnership with the Yukon First Nation Chamber of Commerce, hosted the Yukon First Nations Defence and Security Industries Conference in April 2025.²³

These activities directly informed the *Yukon First Nations Defence and Security* report released in August 2025.²⁴ Recognizing “the systemic exclusion of First Nations governments from decisions that directly affect their lands, people, and safety,” it resonates with the Inuit strategies in emphasizing that “Yukon First Nations are not passive stakeholders, but essential decision-making partners with the knowledge, jurisdiction, and the lived experience needed to guide security planning in their territories” (p. 8). The

72-page report is strategic in its presentation, emphasizing existing legal frameworks for meaningful collaboration in defence and security, identifying the primary gaps in military coordination in the Yukon, and offering twelve practical recommendations for federal partners and YFNs to move forward.

The report begins by emphasizing the history of defence in the Yukon and its effects on YFNs, namely the impacts of constructing the Alaska Highway, which displaced communities and damaged traditional livelihoods. “Mainstream histories often portray the Alaska Highway as an engineering triumph: an emblem of progress, northern development, and military cooperation between the U.S. and Canada,” it highlights. “But these accounts too often overlook or erase the experiences of Yukon First Nations, whose lands, families, and ways of life were profoundly impacted by the highway’s construction. While the public narrative celebrates speed, scale, and nation-building, many Yukon First Nations remember this moment as one of destruction, dispossession, and deep loss.” The report states that “to move forward together in genuine partnership, acknowledging this history and the enduring legacies of defence projects in the Yukon is vital” (p. 9).

Yukon First Nations Defence and Security highlights that legal frameworks for meaningful collaboration exist but are underutilized. Specifically, section 6.5 of the YFN Umbrella Final Agreement – a constitutionally-protected modern treaty – governs military access to YFN settlement land, stating that consent must be given by the affected First Nation (p. 10). Nonetheless, YFNs insist that “notification alone is no longer sufficient” and that “the next step must involve respectful Nation-to-Nation collaboration in planning and decision-making” (p. 11). The report proposes that, through these existing legal frameworks, the roles of YFNs could be expanded and formalized to include approving military exercises occurring on their territories and creating joint planning tables (p. 11).

AFN Yukon highlights two main gaps in military coordination with YFNs in the Yukon: disaster and emergency management (DEM) and search and rescue (SAR). While funding and coordination mechanisms exist, they remain “fragmented, reactive, and insufficient to reflect the leadership roles Yukon First Nations already play and...have the authority to exercise.” YFN governments have the legal responsibility to declare emergencies and coordinate responses on their settlement lands, but “the DEM roles and responsibilities of Yukon First Nations outside the UFA framework remain relatively unclear” (p. 13). By extension, YFN governments are not being recognized as equal and essential partners, are excluded from key policies and funding programs, and still await reimbursement for past disaster responses that they have undertaken (p. 14). Similar patterns are raised in terms of SAR, with YFNs being “too often treated as informal participants in a system they regularly lead” (p. 15). The report states that YFN actions in SAR operations are often “unrecognized, uncompensated, and informal, despite being essential.”¹⁰ and that formalizing YFNs’ role in SAR will recognize pre-existing jurisdiction, honour experience, and display sovereignty in action.

Finally, the report presents twelve recommendations that address the priorities of YFNs in the defence and security space. Recommendation 1 relates to acknowledging the history of defence in the Yukon, recommending a “formal recognition of the history of defence in the Yukon and a joint commitment to move forward together, including support for community-led historical and environ-

mental reclamation.” Recommendations 2-8 are targeted toward the federal and territorial governments and present specific policy proposals to address the gaps identified in the report, namely to “Establish Formal Information-Sharing and Co-Planning Protocols with Yukon First Nations” (Recommendation 2), “Establish a Yukon First Nation Emergency Management Function through Fiscal Transfer Agreements” (Recommendation 6), and “Formalize Yukon First Nations’ Role in Search and Rescue” (Recommendation 7).

Recommendations 9-12 encourage YFN governments to deepen participation in the defence and security space, namely to “Close Knowledge Gaps to Help Yukon First Nation Businesses Compete in Defence Procurement” (Recommendation 10), “Deepen Yukon First Nation Engagement with Intelligence and Security Agencies” (Recommendation 11), and “Support Yukon First Nation-Led Forums on Defence, Security, and Safety” (Recommendation 12) (pp. 33-43).

While this report recognizes that security in the North must be viewed through a comprehensive and human-centred lens, it differs from the Inuit reports analyzed earlier in that it speaks primarily to matters within the mandates of “hard” security-oriented partners such as the Department of National Defence/Canadian Armed Forces, including where these intersect with SAR and disaster response and emergency management. Attentive to “soft security” and socio-economic considerations, *Yukon First Nations Defence and Security* does not fixate on the threat of foreign invasion and instead focuses on current challenges associated with climate change impacts, infrastructure vulnerabilities, and the need for preparedness and resilience (pp. 16, 27). “Yukon First Nations are already leading in emergency management, infrastructure development, and economic innovation,” AFN Yukon Regional Chief Kluane Adamek noted. “The report calls on all partners to recognize, support, and resource that leadership,” offering “a roadmap for how Canada can strengthen its northern security by working with, rather than around, Yukon First Nations.”²⁵

Conclusions

The three reports that we have summarized offer important examples of how Indigenous Peoples in Northern Canada intend to position themselves at the forefront of security discussions in the Arctic. First and foremost, all of the strategies define security broadly. It is more than traditional military threats and must include human security issues such as reliable and climate-resilient infrastructure, strong economies, food security, and cultural continuity. Climate change is highlighted as the most significant and immediate security threat, both as a driver of increased regional activity and as a cause of direct environmental insecurity for Northern Peoples. In terms of state-based threats, Russia and China are specifically identified as key competitors or adversaries who “are ramping up their activities in the Arctic as they compete for authority, influence and critical mineral wealth” (NTI/GN, p. 29), with the ITK report lumps in the United States as another actor “aggressively asserting their influence now” (ITK, p. 6). These dynamics demand stronger partnership between Inuit, First Nations, and the Government of Canada to protect Indigenous Peoples and advance shared priorities.

The documents reject any notion that Indigenous Peoples are passive stakeholders in defence and security deliberations, insisting that they are rightsholders whose government-to-government relationships with the Government of Canada necessitate a spirit of partnership to set priorities and

co-develop solutions. The arguments by ITK, NTI, and AFN Yukon Region are rooted in the legal authority of Indigenous Peoples in modern treaties that stipulate a Nation-to-Nation approach. All three reports note that, to be effective partners, Indigenous organizations need dedicated, long-term funding to build internal capacity so that they can engage more fully on defence issues that affect them, lead emergency management efforts, and pursue economic opportunities. Along these lines, AFN Yukon Region called specifically for Canada “to begin considering formal, enduring roles for Indigenous experts in Arctic and defence planning and strategy, beyond the important contributions of the Canadian Rangers at the local, regional, and national levels” (p. 36).

Canadian Indigenous perspectives on sovereignty, security, and defence also highlight the centrality of Indigenous Knowledge and ways of knowing, being, and seeing. Each strategy emphasizes the tangible benefits of traditional knowledge and on-the-land expertise for effective security planning, emergency response, and environmental monitoring. The Nunavut and Yukon reports both place explicit emphasis on the Canadian Rangers, Indigenous Guardian programs, and other local community-based groups as valuable first responders in remote areas who deserve more support, resources, and recognition.

All three strategies see defence and security investments as opportunities for economic development, particularly through procurement and infrastructure projects. While historical examples that they reference serve as a reminder of how defence and security initiatives can cause dislocation and ongoing trauma, the Indigenous organizations all project optimism that new investments in Canadian Arctic security represent a way to address civilian infrastructure deficits and foster economic development. In advocating for Indigenous procurement targets and for local businesses and development corporations to be at the forefront of defence-related infrastructure and service contracts, they also see material ways for Indigenous companies to benefit. “Inuit have a vision of Inuit Nunangat as the primary driver of growth in the Canadian economy over the coming decades,” the ITK report describes. The Inuit-Crown partnership “is necessary for the ascendancy of Inuit Nunangat within Canada and the ascendancy of Canada as a powerful Arctic State within the international community” (p. 8). In this sense, Indigenous sovereignty and Canadian sovereignty, and Indigenous security and Canadian security, and inextricably intertwined.

Notes

1. Department of National Defence (DND), *Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence* (Ottawa: DND, 2024), <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/north-strong-free-2024.html>; Global Affairs Canada, *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* (Ottawa: Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2024), <https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/transparence-transparence/arctic-arctique/arctic-policy-politique-arctique.aspx?lang=eng>. See also P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “‘The most urgent and important task we face’: Framing the Arctic focus in Canada’s April 2024 defence policy update,” *Arctic Yearbook 2024*, eds. Lassi Heininen, Heather Exner-Pirot, and Justin Barnes, https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2024/Briefing_Notes/BN5_Lackenbauer.pdf; P. Whitney Lackenbauer, ed. *Canadian Arctic Defence and Foreign Policy: Recent Developments*

- (Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN), 2025), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Cdn-Arctic-Def-For-Pol-Recent-Developments-PWL-mar2025.pdf>; and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy: Some Old, Some Changed, Some New” in *Arctic Yearbook 2025*, eds. Lassi Heininen, Heather Exner-Pirot, and Justin Barnes, *forthcoming*.
2. ITK, “Who We Are,” <https://www.itk.ca/national-voice-for-communities-in-the-canadian-arctic/>. For a detailed report produced by NAADSN in partnership with ITK, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer with Peter Kikkert, *Canadian Inuit and North American Defence Modernization: Background Considerations* (June 2023), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/23jun-Inuit-NA-defence-modernization-report-PWL-final.pdf>.
 3. NTI, “About,” <https://www.tunngavik.com/about/>.
 4. Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Yukon Region, <https://afnyukon.ca/>. Soon after they released the report summarized below, the YFNs collectively decided to amalgamate the AFN Yukon Regional Office with the Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN), a political advocacy organization to protect the rights, titles and interests of YFNs holding traditional territories, effective 1 October 2025. Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN), <https://www.cyfn.ca/>.
 5. For example, Mary Simon wrote in a 2007 article: “Rather than training military personnel from southern Canada to drive Ski-Doos up and down Ellesmere Island (usually with Inuit guides) to demonstrate our ‘control’ over the Arctic, would it not make more sense to invest in the economies of Nunavut, Nunavik, the Inuvialuit region, and Nunatsiavut to ensure that Inuit youth have meaningful opportunities in their communities?” Mary Simon, “Sovereignty From the North,” *The Walrus*, November 2007, republished November 2023, <https://thewalrus.ca/sovereignty-from-the-north/>. See also Mary Simon, “Militarization and the Aboriginal Peoples,” in *Arctic Alternatives: Civility or Militarism in the Circumpolar North*, ed. Franklyn Griffiths (Toronto: Science for Peace, 1992), 55-67; Harris MacLeod, “Arctic sovereignty is built on strong northern communities, says National Inuit Leader Simon,” *The Hill Times*, 25 August 2009, 10-11; Mary Simon, “Inuit and the Canadian Arctic: Sovereignty Begins at Home,” *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d’études canadiennes* 43, no. 2 (2009): 250-260, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/384819>; Scot Nickels, ed., *Nilliajut: Inuit Perspectives on Security, Patriotism and Sovereignty* (Ottawa: ITK, 2013); Dalee Dorough et al, *Voices from the Arctic: Diverse Views on Canadian Arctic Security* (Peterborough: NAADSN, 2021), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20-nov-ArcticVoicesProceedings-upload.pdf>; and Meaghan Brackenbury, “Reframing Arctic Sovereignty,” *Up Here* (March/April 2022), <https://uphere.ca/articles/reframing-arctic-sovereignty>.
 6. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Diversity Statistics, Self-Identification Data, and the Canadian Rangers: Underestimating Indigenous Peoples’ Participation Rates in the Canadian Army,” *NAADSN Policy Briefs* (19 April 2021), 10 pp. https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Lackenbauer_Rgr-Diversity-Statistics-final.pdf.
 7. See, for example, P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Peter Kikkert, *Measuring the Success of the Canadian Rangers*, report to the 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group (October 2020), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Rangers-Success-Metrics-Lackenbauer-Kikkert-high-res.pdf>; and Peter Kikkert and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “A Great Investment in Our Communities’: Strengthening Nunavut’s Whole-of-Society Search and

- Rescue Capabilities,” *Arctic* 74/3 (September 2021): 258-75, <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/arctic/article/view/73099/55187>.
8. Mélanie Gagnon and Inuit Elders, *Inuit Recollections on the Military Presence in Iqaluit* (Iqaluit: Nunavut Arctic College, 2002).
 9. Sam Hossack, “A Broken History: Examining the Events, Experiences, and Narratives of the High Arctic Relocations, 1950-2010” (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Waterloo, 2025), <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/items/fa944140-9ed8-4da5-99b5-e1e9c0175eb4>. On the debate, see Shelagh Grant, “Errors Exposed”: *Inuit Relocations to the High Arctic 1953-1960*, Documents on Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security (DCASS) no.6 (Calgary: Arctic Institute of North America, 2016), <https://pubs.aina.ucalgary.ca/dcass/82785.pdf>; and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, ed., *Human Flagpoles or Humanitarian Action? Discerning Government Motives behind the Inuit Relocations to the High Arctic, 1953–1960*, DCASS no. 16 (Calgary: Arctic Institute of North America, 2020), <https://arts.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/teams/25/dcass16-human-flagpoles-pwl.pdf>.
 10. See, for example, Ekaterina Zmyvalova, “Indigenous peoples of Russia during the war time,” *Arctic Yearbook* 2023, https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2023/Scholarly_Papers/18_Zmyvalova_AY2023.pdf; P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Evgeniia Sidorova, and Sergey Sukhankin, “RAIPON, Russian Indigenous Peoples, and the War in Ukraine: Pro-Kremlin Narratives and Voices of Dissent,” *NAADSN Policy Primer*, 21 July 2023, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/23jul-RAIPON-Russian-Indigenous-PWL-ES-SS-NAADSN-policy-primer.pdf>.
 11. See Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, *The Oceans That We Share: Inuit Nunangat Marine Policy Priorities and Recommendations* (Ottawa: ITK, 2025), <https://www.itk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/20230322-Marine-Policy-Paper-FINAL-SIGNED.pdf>.
 12. Jien International Investment, a Chinese company, operates the Nunavik Nickel Project in Nunavik through its wholly-owned subsidiary Canadian Royalties Inc. MMG Resources, also majority owned by the Chinese government, has been in possession of the Izok and High Lake deposits since 2009 when it took over the assets of Oz Minerals.
 13. See Anders Edstrom, Guðbjörg Ríkey Th. Hauksdóttir, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Cutting Through Narratives on Chinese Arctic Investments,” Harvard Kennedy Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs *Policy Brief* (June 2025), <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/china-arctic-investments>.
 14. Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) press release, “Inuit and Canada Share Northwest Passage Sovereignty – ICC Canada President,” 8 May 2019, <https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/press-releases/inuit-and-canada-share-northwest-passage-sovereignty-icc-canada-president/>.
 15. Prime Minister of Canada, “Canada joins new NATO Defence Investment Pledge,” 25 June 2025, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2025/06/25/canada-joins-new-nato-defence-investment-pledge#:~:text=An%20additional%201.5%25%20of%20GDP,as%20well%20as%20civilian%20readiness>.
 16. CBC News, “Plans on Arctic sovereignty, defence must be done in partnership, says Inuit leader,” 9 April 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbxRQcY8SiI>.

17. Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) and Government of Nunavut (GN), “NTI and GN leadership add Infrastructure and Arctic Sovereignty and Security to joint workplans,” 20 May 2025, <https://www.gov.nu.ca/en/newsroom/nti-and-gn-leadership-add-infrastructure-and-arctic-sovereignty-and-security-joint>.
18. Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Summit, “Our Arctic, Our Strength,” <https://www.arcticsecuritysummit.ca/>.
19. Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. and Government of Nunavut, *Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Strategy* (August 2025), <https://www.assembly.nu.ca/sites/default/files/2025-09/TD-442-6%282%29-EN-Nunavut%20Arctic%20Sovereignty%20and%20Security%20Strategy.pdf>.
20. Government of Nunavut, “GN and NTI Release Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Strategy,” 12 September 2025, <https://www.gov.nu.ca/en/newsroom/gn-and-nti-release-nunavut-arctic-sovereignty-and-security-strategy-2025-09-12>.
21. See Nicholas Glesby and Whitney Lackenbauer. “Balloons, NORAD, and the Defence of North America: Reflections on the February 2023 Incidents Concerning High-Altitude Objects in North America.” NAADSN, 8 February 2024, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/24feb-naadsn-Feb2023-NA-balloons-report.pdf>.
22. This incident also prompted the Yukon Government to establish a Yukon Arctic Security Advisory Council, which issued a November 2024 report highlighting the Yukon's role in Arctic security and offering recommendations to strengthen defence, infrastructure, and partnerships. See Yukon Arctic Security Advisory Council, *Report of the Yukon Arctic Security Advisory Council* (Whitehorse: Government of Yukon, 2024), https://yukon.ca/sites/default/files/eco/eco-arctic-security-advisory-council-report_0.pdf. For more details on Yukon and security, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Situating the Yukon in Canadian Defence and Security* (Peterborough: NAADSN, 2024), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024apr-Lackenbauer-Yukon-defence-security.pdf>.
23. AFN Yukon Region, “Yukon First Nations Defence and Security Industries Conference,” <https://afnyukon.ca/yukon-first-nations-defence-and-security-industry-conference/>.
24. Arturo Calvo, Hannah Geiser, Peter Kikkert, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Yukon First Nations Defence and Security: Prioritizing Sovereignty, Preparedness, and Partnership* (Whitehorse: AFN Yukon Region, August 2025), <https://afnyukon.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/YAF2140-FN-Defence-and-Security-Report-02C-Final-Digital-1.pdf>.
25. Assembly of First Nations Yukon Regional Chief Kluane Adamek, “First Nation Partnerships in Defence Strengthen Northern Security,” *Canadian Institute for Arctic Security Commentaries*, 13 August 2025, <https://www.arcticsecurityinstitute.ca/commentary/first-nation-partnerships-in-defence-strengthen-northern-security>.