

# The Resilience of Borders in the Circumpolar North: Canada and U.S. Policy Boundaries

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Heather N. Nicol  
University of West Georgia

## Abstract

Canada and the U.S. have played important roles in contributing to the building of a new framework for cooperation, for example, through the Arctic Council initiative. But the process of how to construct northern policy, by whom, and for whom is not always unproblematic. Several issues complicate the process, including the fact that the Arctic region encompasses at least eight sovereign states which have signed the AEPS and the Arctic Council Agreements.<sup>1</sup> This means that there are very different, often competing, ideas about the place of the circumpolar north in national policy. It is to against this backdrop that Canada's "northern dimension" foreign policy role needs to be articulated, and the U.S. approach to Arctic human security explored, since there remain significant questions about the future and the impact of such initiatives, as well as concerns about the existence of gaps in policy, efficacy and cooperation. This paper looks at several significant gaps within northern dimension policy among North American nations, and argues that they are constitutive in reinforcing boundaries between Canada and the U.S. which will remain significant in the near future.

## Introduction

In the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new ways of thinking about the circumpolar north have redefined the significance of this region in political, environmental and cultural terms, particularly with respect to new ideas about human security in the post Cold War era. No longer functioning as a frontier defining the outer edges of a superpower stand-off, as it did during the Cold War, the circumpolar north has become more important in terms of its role as a 'homeland' for its many indigenous peoples. Yet, at the same time, its vulnerability to global environmental degradation has become increasingly obvious, and the need for cooperative action ever more pressing.

The question posed in this paper is whether, under these changing economic, political and cultural conditions, the north is also becoming a common borderless space. The paper suggests that this is really a question of perspective. If we address the north at the level of indigenous peoples, indigenous transnational flows and cross-border connections, like those of the Inuit Tapirit, or the Sami, then the answer may be most certainly, yes. On the other hand, approached from the perspective of the circumpolar north as a region in which the traditional unified or nation-state exerts a claim to exclusive territory, then the answer is no. Indeed, over the past decade many "northern dimension" policies have been developed by states such as Canada, or by the EU, which although opening up the possibility of cross-border cooperation, firmly proscribe the nature of the at cooperation and its function and limitation. Canada's northern foreign policy and the role of northern borders in achieving its specific goals for example, can be understood in context of:

- 1) Its place within a more general international movement to construct a 'northern dimension' among North American and European countries, as well as Russia; and

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<sup>1</sup> See E.C.H. Keskitalo's Glossary in "Negotiating the Arctic: The Construction of an International Region" (London: Routledge, 2004) for chronological index.

- 2) The potential impact of an emerging consensus about, and approach to, 'circumpolar north' issues including environment, governance, traditional culture, sustainable development and 'north-south' relations among, and within, 'Arctic' nations.

Similar themes characterize the position of the U.S. In this sense, the circumpolar North as a new framework or new kind of region is itself an institutional and cultural creation which seeks to coordinate disparate political responses to specific issues such as environmental conservation, quality of life or economic development. The role of the Arctic Council as a coordinating both significant and limited in the sense that its authority does not extend to the level of making hard and fast policy which can be implemented outside of consensus and agreement by the Arctic Eight countries (Canada, the USA, Finland, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Sweden). While the Arctic Council has expended its role from that envisioned in the mid-1990s, when it was originally formed, and indeed has sparked a number of initiatives which include a focus on health, information and communications, education and scientific research, it faces the problem that today, the North remains substantially divided into territorial segments. The EU, the U.S., Canada and the Russian Federation maintain significant claim to their national spaces, and administer policies in accordance with firm boundary lines, in ways which no amount of environmental cooperation will erase. For example, The EU has implemented a Northern Dimension Foreign Policy, and indeed is on the second iteration of this policy framework, while Canada has recently evaluated its own Northern Dimension Foreign Policy platform. The USA, on the other hand, treats its northern territories as an extension of the south, arguing that no state has the right to make policy, especially foreign policy, independent of the federal government context and in this sense there are limitations to the foreign policy cooperation interventions that Alaska can make as a state. At the same time, Russia has an interest in Northern Dimensions, although no specific policy in which to propose new kinds of cooperation across the region. It may well be that a new EU Northern Dimension relationship addressed this gap in the near future.

In this paper we will explore the issue of division within the North American circumpolar North, with particular attention to the two major North American nations—Canada and the USA—and the potential for resolution of these divisions in the future. In disentangling these competing claims and visions of sovereignty and human security within the circumpolar north, it is clear that the issue highlights an even bigger problem than conventional versus comprehensive definitions of security—It highlights the intractable nature of certain international boundaries within a region where the potential promise of sustainable development based upon transnational cooperation has only recently been raised by circumpolar organizations such as the Arctic Council.

Theoretically, the paper works from the assumption that there is a continuing relevance to borders in a global world (Nicol and Townsend-Gault, 2005; Nicol and Minghi, 2005), and that borders do indeed continue to “work”, even under conditions of globalization. They are functional as well as symbolic, discursive as material entities. Indeed, in this sense borders in the North can be seen as points of reference for containing and authorizing narratives—whether these be cultural, political, economic or spatial of individual nation states, at the same time that they create points of connection for transnational institutional dialogues about specific subjects which remain state-centered discourses. This approach derives its justification from the fact that borders have proven to be enduring, if not enigmatical physical and symbolic constructs even under globalization, and as Megoran, Raballand and Bouyjou (2005) demonstrate are “at the skin of the state”, at the same time that they are, literally and rhetorically “at its heart”. This means that the new geopolitical structure of the internationalized circumpolar North (Heininen, 2005) does not derive its legitimacy from lack of state, but indeed from state, as it is increasingly committed to the transnational forum. The fluorescence of actors, and the rise of new kinds of actors and new kinds of institutions are themselves a response to both the historical reluctance of traditional states—and/or the lack of institutional capacity of these states—to create a borderlands with its neighbors in the North. Current patterns in regionalization, in the sense of a region-building process oriented from the top-down, focuses upon the common characteristics and challenges faced by all the circumpolar countries, and the resolution of these issues using a multilateral approach which requires appreciation of the limitations to which each state is prepared to act. While borderlands are classically defined as a zone or area of division characterized by cultural

overlap and where national identities become blurred (Augelli, 1980), this does not preclude interaction among states at the institutional or formal level. The current political and boundary structure of the circumpolar North, particularly in North America, is based upon cooperation in a limited number of environmental fora. Indeed, even in creating borderlands, zones of common ground and transnational cooperation, like Haparanda/Tornio in North Europe, bridging borders rather than lack of borders, seems to be the order of the day.

This has clearly been the case in Canada, where new forms of indigenous governance mark the creation of new internal boundaries in areas such as Nunavut, and where the concept of an “indigenous North” has become a politically expedient tool in which to engage in Northern dimension dialogue and cooperation. In this way the common connections among peoples of the North American circumpolar North is relevant. But developing a common ground through the development of more sensitivity to the concerns of Northern populations, has been accompanied by the development of policies which see the primary purpose of Canada’s Northern Dimension Foreign Policy as a chance to build relations at an international scale, and these focus upon very traditional geopolitical or geostrategic concerns. These include relations with Russia, control of Canada’s northern waterways, protecting the sovereignty of the Arctic and High Arctic, and advancing the cause for economic development of strategic natural resources within the north.

Indeed, there are a number of policy gaps or state-centered characteristics of both Canadian and American approaches to Northern policies which increase the propensity for northern solitudes, stemming from different political, cultural, ideological and economic positions. Today these clearly restrict the potential for a borderless North, and will probably continue to do so in the future. The major areas in which such gaps may preclude the development of a seamless or borderless northern region are environmental, programmatic, territorial, identity and regionally-based. They include an exclusive focus on environment along with lack of programs and policies which don’t see “the north” as a special case (delivery of services like education, health, communications based upon national standards) (ICT in the U.S.); a lack of cooperative mechanisms—for new kinds of environmental conflicts (oil in the ANWR lands); and the problem of developing a consensus to identify the most important issues for cooperation.

We will examine each of these from the perspective of their impact upon transnational interactions in the North American North, and speculate about their continuing and perhaps increased impact in the future.

### **Expanding the Environmental Agenda**

In many ways the great success story of the circumpolar north has been in its ability to unite Northern Europe and North America in a consensus about the need for transnational environmental policies adapted to the specific challenges which face the North. International agreement on the need to develop environmental protection mechanisms within the circumpolar region was generated in the 1980s, prior to efforts to build a more comprehensive approach to human sustainability through political venues. Many circumpolar countries, or those countries which contained portions of Arctic and sub-Arctic environments within their territory, participated in international discussions about environment. Most specifically, these efforts to build support and capacity for human sustainability included new models for regional governance. Nordic countries—especially Norway and Finland—were among the first to define their version of northern policies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As a result of these and other broad initiatives, 1991 saw the signing of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) between the governments of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the U.S., as the first non-governmental forum for Arctic issues covering the whole circumpolar North emerged. It included the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program (AMAP) to “monitor identified pollution risks and their impacts on the Arctic ecosystem”<sup>17</sup> (AMAP, 2004) as well as the initiative for protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME), a program for Emergency Preparedness and Response (EPPR), and an agreement on the need for the conservation of Arctic Fauna and Flora. The AEPS was to meet regularly after this, with the view in mind of crafting policies which would increase the protection of the Arctic environment from environmental degradation through a process of coordinated cooperation. In 1996 the eight Arctic states together with Northern Indigenous peoples’ organizations established the Arctic Council

including two main activities, or pillars, environmental protection and sustainable development.

The problem with this environmental consensus, is however, that it is inherently focused upon certain activities and not others. Young (2004) identifies the propensity for the North to be understood as “The scientific Arctic” and as such has been of great interest for its research potential to academics. In interviews with U.S. personnel involved in decision-making at the level of policy for the Arctic Council, the claim has often been made that the most proper area of concern for the federal government is the area of scientific research (presumably Western scholarship style) and data gathering, rather than upon less rigorous scientific themes issues such as quality of life or maintaining indigenous lifestyles. While the Arctic is indeed an important bellwether for the state of the planet, this focus on formal science has differentiated and at times devalued traditional knowledge.

This has meant, historically, that as far as the US approach to the North American circumpolar region is concerned, at the state level, there is a tenuous link between the promotion of civil society and human security beyond the context of environmental issues. Indeed, there is no region, and no geopolitical discourse which connects people and place outside of a fairly narrowly and empirically defined environmental agenda. State Department expertise consists of personnel previously assigned to border security and INS, and State Department interest and with respect to the work of the Council is limited to concern with scientific, environmental and technical issues which affect the state of Alaska. As such, Washington's failure to engage on the level of a circumpolar north has been criticised by Canadian and Europeans, but on the other hand, it has given Canada opportunity to navigate the Arctic Council to some extent freed from the confines of a formal and separate bilateral relationship with the US on indigenous issues—particularly in the area of initiatives to strengthen the role of indigenous peoples in regional government. This includes Canadian support of, and cooperation with trans-national NGOs such as the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, and the Inuit Tapirisat.

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In the U.S., for example, environmental security for human populations as expressed in terms of food security is a major concern, although clearly in terms of the political debate within the U.S. Senate, it is ranked at a lower rung on the scale than energy security for the southern population ecumenes of Arctic states. The problem with the existing environmental consensus, is however, that it is inherently focused upon certain activities and not others. Young (2004) identifies the propensity for the North to be understood as “The scientific Arctic” and as such has been of great interest for its research potential to academics. In interviews with U.S. personnel involved in decision-making at the level of

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This has been an important point of division between Canada and the U.S., particularly in terms 1995, the U.S. Senate voted in favor of drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), proponents of this project claiming that “tapping the refuge would lessen dependence on foreign oil, help bring down energy prices, provide jobs and ease the country's growing trade imbalance. They also argued that modern technology would limit the area needed to drill in the arctic (sic).”<sup>2</sup> But where the U.S. government claims that their indigenous populations are “on board”. there may well be significant effects upon quality of life for Gwitch'in on the other side of the nearby Canadian boundary. They fear the decline of the Porcupine Caribou herd upon which they rely as a major food source.

While clearly there is tremendous room for improvement, the Canadian government has found itself more closely aligned with scientific research which supports indigenous knowledge and science which aligns with indigenous interests in certain strategic cases, such as that of the Gwitch'in in Old Crow.<sup>3</sup> A powerful ally, the Government of Canada, has fought for the interests of the Vuntut Gwitch'in in ways the U.S. Government would not. The Canadian Government has offered “oil” for “oil”—lucrative compensation for loss of oil revenues and supplies from ANWR lands will be made up in other areas of northern Canada. The offer has been rebuffed, suggesting that the very concept of comprehensive security in U.S. geopolitical discourse, is at issue. Indeed, the government of Canada will fight for these people the way America have not fought for the residents of Kaktovik, Alaska,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The Vuntut Gwitch'in first Nation, who live on the Canadian side fo the border. They have a longstanding culture and traditions concerning the land that has been passed down over many years, and they fear that their way of life, particularly the caribou hunting tradition, will be destroyed by the oil activities in the ANWR lands. The Vuntut Gwitch'in are very spiritually tied into their land as well as their traditions. In Old Crow, Village Chief Evon Peters has observed that, “the animals, the rivers - we're essentially a voice for things that cannot talk. We don't see ourselves as separate from those things. If the rivers and animals are poisoned, the poison will work their way into us, too.” (Banarjee, 2004). The link between the welfare of the Porcupine Caribou herd and the Vuntut Gwitch'in is particularly intense—and so the Caribou themselves are yet another character in this scenario is the Porcupine Caribou, the main source of protein for many groups of both U.S. (Alaskan) and Canadian Indians. The Porcupine Caribou Herd has been important to the Gwitch'in for many generations and, if they have room to continue breeding, or calving, they can continue to be a part of this life process. Hunting these animals is not simply a sport, but a way of life that has endured through the increasing rise in urban destruction and population. Caribou have been described as the most important land-based species for people living in the arctic.

fundamentally, as we shall see shortly, because Canadians structure the importance of indigenous peoples and human security in a different way than do Americans.

This conflict suggests that while the concept of borderlessness may be true for caribou, there are firm borders in terms of the prioritization of comprehensive security for human populations of the north, and such borders matter substantially. They are borders which reflect different calculations concerning the role of quality of life and cultural preservation. For example, the Government of Canada has issued declarations voicing its disapproval of the ANWR oil projects, particularly the most recent proposal to drill in the ANWR coastal plains. Their resistance is based upon the fear that drilling will disrupt the Porcupine caribou calving grounds resulting in a serious loss of Gwitch'in traditional food sources. But it is also contextualized within a Canadian security discourse in which sovereignty in the Arctic is increasingly important. This approach is consistent with the more general way in which the U.S. engages within the Arctic—it is clearly more interested in using the region as a means of maintaining its global position as an economic powerhouse, rather than is considering the concept of comprehensive security for regional populations. The approach taken by US decision-makers, at least those in Washington, with respect to the circumpolar north is distinctively different from that of Canadians and Europeans, although there is overlap with the European Union's focus upon Eastern and Northern European states. At the state level, American policy-makers are less inclined to make policies which promote a formal relationship with the Arctic Circle. The US approach to participation in the Arctic Council, for example, is driven by a number of specific issues, rather than by a sense of geographical regionalism. Indeed, national security, economic development and scientific research are important U.S. interests in the region, and Alaska would not, for example, be able to make or participate independently in policy in this area—only Washington. According to the official political rhetoric a true U.S. Arctic policy “emphasizes environmental protection, sustainable development, human health and the role of indigenous people” but this emphasis is specific to US peoples and places, not Pan Arctic indigenous organizations nor transnational issues above and beyond environment. Consequently, it would be fair to say that theoretically, the US position towards the circumpolar region remains traditional, in the sense that it is based upon a state-centered agenda in which security and national interests are emphasized, although with recognition of the broader context of globalization.

Within the US, too, until recently, northern dimension foreign policy has meant, strictly speaking, the Baltic States and “security” issues. The development in 1997 of a North European Initiative was designed to address the issues of a new geopolitical order in the wake of the Cold War and dissolution of the USSR. Indeed, the US approach to the north can be understood as having two very separate sets of initiatives and policy directives, and is administered under two separate State Department programs. On the one hand, the NEI and ePINE are steered towards foreign relations in which more general US policy goals of building democratic and stable society, and promoting free markets are met. In both, there has been a focus upon the subnational level, with a broadening out to include actors such as NGOs, TNCs, multilateral organizations and others, as well as a broadening out of the definition of security interests to include a broad-based concept of human security including “economic deprivation, energy shortages, weakness of democratic institutions, communicable diseases, environmental degradation, crime, corruption and loss of cultural identity” (Sergounin, 2002). On the other hand, a separate US State department program administers US participation in the Arctic Council, with virtually no overlap in personnel, program or policy development between the ePINE and Arctic Council programs. There is no single ‘northern dimension’ to US foreign policy.

Indeed, US consideration of the North American circumpolar north suffers from a lack of a more general, or even geographical perspective as well as a lack of focus on human security. In counter distinction to its northern European approach, US state interests here are not multilateral, and are limited almost exclusively to environmental concerns, as evidenced by the nature of US participation in AEPS and the Arctic Council, and the structure of “science research” emanating from American foundations focusing on the north. Furthermore, the goals are strategic: directed toward the Baltic Sea region and Northwest Russia. In some respects, comprehensive northern foreign policy in the US has had, as its focus, the intent of developing a plan to include the Baltic States in NATO, to support their inclusion in the EU, and to engage Russia in new dialogues which would lessen the potential for a new east-west divide to form.

It remains difficult to see how a broad-based human security discourse emerged as part of the US northern initiative, or how borders are being bridged in recent years. There is no sense of a broad circumpolar region, nor did it promote efforts to engage with nations not located in North America. The US approach towards a general Arctic environment tends to remain, instead, compartmentalized in terms of sector by sector agreements within the framework of the AEPS and the Arctic Council. Moreover, because of the state-centred focused, conceptions of a US northern dimension do not, by definition, consider cooperation with Canada beyond a narrow set of initiatives based upon environment and health. In this sense, the USA cannot claim to have a northern dimension to its foreign policy, nor does it recognize the need for a geographical approach to northern environments. Its concept of northern dimension remains an issue-based approach in which traditional security and strategic concerns dominate.

The same is true at the state level. Alaskan participation in the circumpolar north is through institutions which have definition in traditional terms—that is to say as institutions of the state government, or as universities, research foundations, and indigenous peoples' organizations. But it seems that although there are venues for indigenous participation based upon regional-wide affiliation (i.e. the ICC) US and Alaskan decision-makers have pushed for inclusion of indigenous peoples on narrower terms, in context of their role within US national or subnational institutions, with the intent of countering a more broad-based Pan Arctic definition. Arctic issues are more narrowly defined as well—mainly in the area of environment, health and education. Nonetheless, the Alaskan perspective is more highly regionalized and defines "northern dimension" of US foreign policy in which North America is featured than the Washington perspective.

Indeed, the sovereignty discourse become more acute as global warming proceeds, principally because of the potential changes in terms of the Arctic as a maritime transit route when shipping lanes become free of Arctic ice. Honderich argues that this is precisely because "for centuries the only thing strategic about Canada's Arctic was its impenetrability" which effectively served as a natural barrier and in the case of borders and maritime claims, made the delimitation let alone the demarcation of these all but a moot point. By all accounts, the problem of ownership, in terms of sovereignty conflicts, are looming larger in the circumpolar North. At the same time questions of ownership become increasingly important, in the sense of who has rights not just to access, but to decision-making concerning resource development and the allocation of natural resources. In the Canadian Arctic, nor example, patrolling the borderline has become increasingly important—not only in terms of Canada's attempts to maintain sovereign claims in the face of pressure from the U.S., but also in terms of pressures from Denmark and Greenland. The result has seen renewed interest in "patrolling Canadian territory 'North of 60'." And indeed "In this Northern Area, the Canadian Forces maintains an impressive force of top Reservists called 'Rangers'...In the eastern Arctic, most Rangers are Inuit. They bring with them unique skills, rooted in their demanding ways of finding and killing prey in this tough land"(Arctic Viking, 2005)

Such indigenization of border patrol seems to be a compelling example of the importance of borders even as the circumpolar North becomes increasingly internationalized and global. Indeed, the politics of the future are likely to be more confrontational and located clearly along the borderlines of the circumpolar north, not because of any intrinsic intractability of the region, but because of the nature of the disputes and the structure of formal problem-solving within the region. Discussions over Canada-U.S. maritime boundaries, for example, under conditions of global warming and heightened interest in U.S. energy security, mean that some kind of integrated coastal cooperation model will not be suitable when determining the international boundaries of the Bering Sea in the future—between Canada and the United States. Global warming scenarios suggest that the North will become a more important transit region, meaning that the Northwest Passage, which Canada claims as its internal waters, will be under scrutiny. Sovereignty challenges here, and also in the area of the North Pole, which Denmark has recently laid claim to and in doing so challenged the Canadian Government's presumed sovereignty of the High Arctic, are all issues which will heighten, rather than eliminate, the currency of borders in the North.

## Conclusions

It is clear that there are very significant foreign policy boundaries within the North American Arctic which will continue to reinforce national borders. For example, US interest in indigenous peoples is not particularly significant, and therefore a bone of contention when dealing with other circumpolar states, such as Canada, where indigenous issues are the motor behind a northern dimension foreign policy. This means that the biggest challenge for Canadians, with respect to the US approach to a northern dimension, is perhaps that they must respond to two very different sets of policies which structure the US relationship with the north. One set is a shared AEPS program and Arctic Council, in which both Canadians and Americans (the latter most particularly at the sub-national, level which includes the state of Alaska and various US NGOs), have played an important role. Many Canadian and American institutions have also been central to the process or region-building, contributing to of linkages between academic institutions, indigenous people's fora, as well as exploring the possibilities for environmental cooperation and better health and education opportunities.

Such differences reinforce, rather than erase boundaries. It is difficult to see how formal cooperation will extend much beyond the institutional parameters which currently exist. The problem with circumpolar foreign policy, which sets the tone of the international regime and the geopolitics of security within the north, however, is that it remains cross-cut by competing national claims. One of the firmest lines dividing the north today is that between the U.S. and the rest in terms of issues which fall outside of the rubric of "Arctic science". That is to say that the U.S. has less interest in promoting civil society and political empowerment of indigenous peoples than other Arctic Council member states, than environmental treaties on broad principals which can be adopted with general consensus. This means that when there are competing claims in terms of domestic or national constituencies, the U.S. adopts a state-centered approach, and tends to chose sides based upon traditional security lines. This is clear in the case of the ANWR/Gwitch'in dispute.

In this sense, the circumpolar north suffers from an international regime which is strongly divided by geopolitical discourses which strongly reflect national interest. The geopolitics of oil exploitation is a particularly difficult issue to resolve. Competition between comprehensive security, at least in terms of a security rooted in meeting the basic needs of human populations within the Arctic region, and a more abstract and globalized concept of security, such as sustainable natural resource exploitation or even "energy security" has become increasingly obvious in recent decades. In northern areas, the use of the environment plays an important role in communities' survival and therefore local communities try to get their perspectives noticed in non-local decision making. At the same time the increasingly globalized scale of energy and resource extraction makes the likelihood of such perspectives being listened to, increasingly problematic. So the ANWR issue, although a significant flashpoint, is not likely to be the only clash between competing visions of security—but rather the tip of the iceberg.

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