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An Arctic Focus for Canada's Post-COVID Multilateralist Posture

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The paper considers Canada's multilateralist posture and the key trends that have impacted and shaped multilateral priorities for Canada in recent years. It examines linkages between populist-driven tensions within Canada and its traditional partner countries and the global climate change agenda. Conclusions indicate that a renewed commitment to the Arctic Council should serve as a defining feature of Canada's multilateral positioning moving forward.

Introduction

Transformative global trends that emerged both before and during the 2020 outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic have reinforced the importance of international cooperation and Canada's strong multilateral relationships. Prior to the pandemic, the rise of right-wing populism in many of Canada's traditional partner countries had forced these allies to look increasingly inward and become less engaged in multilateral initiatives. While Canada has remained outspokenly committed to achieving collective global goals — addressing and mitigating the consequences of climate change, in particular — its far-reaching policy priorities can gain traction only through collective efforts with partners. A combination of Canada's declining overseas development and security funding, dwindling support from previously like-minded partners, and a global pandemic that has exposed aspects of Canada's vulnerabilities, suggests that the need to redefine and strengthen the country's multilateral approach has become glaringly clear.

Historically, although the Arctic has seen long-standing disputes over territory and resources, it has also been a space where relationship building and peaceful international cooperation have thrived.¹ With the looming consequences of climate change threatening the Arctic region first and foremost, the Arctic Council not only offers the opportunity for meaningful collaboration on policy issues pertaining to climate change and security, but arguably a less controversial space in which to lead these discussions. Although not all members of the Arctic Council are like-minded to Canada, and the council's place within global governance architecture is small, the Arctic Council has the potential to serve as an avenue for a middle-power voice to strengthen alliances with nations that share Canadian policy priorities and strategies beyond the Arctic. Ultimately, Canada's multilateral posture moving forward will need to support a sense of balance between populist-vs-climate change sentiments and its preparedness, both domestically and in concert with key international partners, for crises that may once again reveal vulnerabilities and test strength. This paper will examine how a renewed commitment to engagement in the Arctic could be a viable avenue for Canada's multilateral agenda, and thus should be considered a key domestic and foreign policy priority.

The paper considers Canada's multilateralist posture and the key trends that have impacted and shaped multilateral priorities for Canada in recent years. It examines linkages between populist-driven tensions within Canada and its traditional partner countries and the global climate change agenda.² The paper then explains Canada's multilateral priorities, which include a significant focus on the Arctic region. Conclusions indicate that, based on the need for fora that allow the deepening of like-minded partnerships and the resetting of other relationships — at the same time as supporting domestic interests and US bilateral relations — a renewed commitment to the Arctic Council should serve as a defining feature of Canada's multilateral positioning moving forward.

¹ Timo Koivurova, "[Analysis: The Arctic conflict — truth, fantasy or a little bit of both?](#)," *High North News*, November 18, 2016.

² Yasmeen Serhan, "[Populism is Morphing in Insidious Ways](#)," *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2020.

Key Trends Shaping Multilateral Priorities

As right-wing populist movements have gained political traction in many of Canada's traditional partner countries, discussion of these populist trends has often focused on immigration policies. With the urgency of the climate crisis being prioritized on the international agenda, greater attention is now being paid to the relationship between right-wing populism and climate skepticism.

While on the one hand there has been a global rise of “green parties,” climate-focused politicians, environmental advocacy groups and demonstrators, these actors must now contend with powerful populist figures such as US President Donald Trump, who has openly denied the seriousness of the climate crisis.³ Concerning narratives from other populists have branded climate change an “elitist hoax” that warrants no further attention.⁴ A report exposing links between populism and climate skepticism suggests that most climate-focused global policies have been driven by the mandates of international organizations.⁵ To populists, a sense of collaborative unity toward a common goal is unappealing and even viewed by some as a threat to state sovereignty. An economic argument is also held up, since populist narratives often argue in favour of the economic benefits for those working in the extractive or industrial sectors.⁶ The perceived battle between the economy and the environment emerges clearly in populist-vs-climate narratives.

The COVID-19 global health pandemic has exposed gaps in Canada's preparedness to address such crises.⁷ It has also served as a reminder that the changing climate could bear responsibility for the next global crisis. This is further underscored by research that indicates the climate crisis could hit Canada's north first and worst.⁸ Dedication to addressing the climate agenda is therefore seen as being beneficial to Canada's global and domestic constituencies.

The local nature of this significant global threat, and the need to address the climate agenda through robust and well-functioning multilateral partnerships, suggest that current levels of climate skepticism remain a concern for Canada. This is evidenced in the way that combating climate change continues to be prioritized across government policy agendas. As these policy agendas can gain traction only with the support of partners, more optimal multilateral positioning in support of this agenda is required. In this context, the Arctic Council could provide the right type of forum to enable Canada's voice to be both credible and heard. It may also provide a more conducive environment to help strengthen Canada's preparedness, in both national and multilateral terms, for future crises.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Arjuna Dibley, “[How to Talk to a Populist About Climate Change](#),” *Foreign Policy*, March 29, 2019.

⁶ Shane Gunster, “[Conservatism, Populism and Crisis](#),” Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, *The Monitor* 26(2), July/August 2019.

⁷ Ann Fitz-Gerald and Hugh Segal, “[Canada needs a post-pandemic foreign policy update](#),” *The Star*, May 22, 2020.

⁸ Christopher Burn, “Northern Canada after Climate Equilibrium” in *Canada's Arctic Agenda: Into the Vortex*, special report edited by John Higginbotham and Jennifer Spence, Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2019, 23.

Canada's Multilateral Priorities Supporting Climate Change

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's 2019 mandate letters to his Cabinet indicate a strong policy directive at the federal level to work toward making Canada a pioneer and global leader in embracing green technologies and mitigating the effects of climate change.⁹ Defining features of this directive include land and ocean conservation, emissions reductions and the setting of achievable goals and legally binding milestones.¹⁰ These letters also prioritize Canada's role as a leading advocate for utilizing a combination of scientific and Indigenous knowledge to support the reduction of the harmful effects of climate change.¹¹ Other policy directives outline Canada's duty to continue scientific research addressing "the great challenges of our age, including climate change, clean growth and a healthy society."¹²

Although these commitments demonstrate a desire for Canada to be a global leader in supporting the climate change agenda, political initiative to achieve this leadership through multilateral fora appears to be lacking. The UN Security Council is often not progressive enough — and, at the moment, too divided — and the 2019 United Nations climate summit has been deemed a failure by many analysts.¹³ Canada's efforts may bear more fruit if coordinated through a multilateral organization that prioritizes both climate change and the Arctic, since the Arctic is a vulnerable global region and an important domestic concern for Canadians.

Among Canada's Arctic priorities in the prime minister's mandate letters are defending the nation's Arctic sovereignty, monitoring the effects of climate change and safeguarding those living in the Arctic, who are often Indigenous communities.¹⁴ These Arctic priorities require that Canada leverage its membership within the Arctic Council, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the United Nations in a way that provides Canada with a greater influence on Arctic issues and further supports the rules-based order, especially when engaged in northern affairs.¹⁵ The Polar Continental Shelf Program and the Eureka Weather Station are important Arctic infrastructure that must be maintained in order to fulfill scientific and defence goals; since environmental science is a priority for the council and defence is a critical issue to many of its members, these could be pursued through the Arctic Council.¹⁶ Lastly, ongoing defence relations between Canada and the United States, especially those relating to monitoring, surveillance and interoperability, reinforce the importance of increased involvement with the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) to secure the continent and "demonstrate international leadership with respect to the navigation of Arctic waters."¹⁷ Whereas NORAD's scope as a

⁹ Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, "[Minister of Environment and Climate Change Mandate Letter](#)," December 13, 2019.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, "[Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry Mandate Letter](#)," December 13, 2019.

¹³ "[COP25 Was a Failure, But Activists' Collective Organizing at the Talks Was Unprecedented](#)," *Democracy Now!*, December 16, 2019.

¹⁴ Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, "[Minister of Foreign Affairs Mandate Letter](#)," December 13, 2019.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, "[Minister of Northern Affairs Mandate Letter](#)," December 13, 2019.

¹⁷ Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, "[Minister of National Defence Mandate Letter](#)," December 13, 2019.

bilateral organization is more narrowly focused, NATO and the United Nations are multilateral institutions with broader policy remits that, at the moment, do not pay significant attention to climate-related Arctic issues. The Arctic Council could be the most appropriate forum for Canada to seek further multilateral support in tackling climate change issues, as it accommodates a more manageable multilateral platform, and a climate-Arctic policy focus. Increasing engagement with the Arctic Council would also satisfy a stated federal policy priority.¹⁸

The Arctic Council also provides Canada with an opportunity for engagement with non-Arctic states with polar interests. Asian-Pacific states are an example of this. China, which maintains permanent observer status in the council, states that its polar policy priorities are to include the expansion of scientific research in the Arctic; to protect the polar region from climate change; to further engage in Arctic governance; and to develop the capacity for Arctic technological innovation and shipping routes.¹⁹ While pursuing new and more expansive trade agreements with Asia-Pacific states is a key element of implementing Canada's Export Diversification Strategy,²⁰ trade can be the stage on which foreign policy tensions are played out, and the current strained relations between Canada and China are a case in point: these are already having a chilling effect on trade in certain industries. Engagement with China and others through the Arctic Council may provide a forum for more constructive dialogue and an opportunity to find common ground on a range of critical shared concerns.²¹

While the Arctic Council is a good starting point for Canada's multilateral engagement on climate change issues, members of the council are not the only states interested in mitigating the effects of climate change. While campaigning in 2019 and 2020 for Canada's bid for a seat on the UN Security Council, Trudeau and Minister of Foreign Affairs François-Philippe Champagne met with leaders from Africa and the Caribbean, who expressed climate-based concerns that require collective attention.²² Also worthy of note are comments that highlight the balance that Canada must strike on the Arctic Council between economic opportunity and environmental conservation, in particular amidst attractions for states to take advantage of the resources of the Arctic region and risk creating environmental degradation in their pursuit.²³ The council therefore could provide Canada with the political and institutional space for deeper multilateral engagement on issues concerning Canada's social, environmental and economic interests in the Arctic.

¹⁸ ["Minister of Foreign Affairs Mandate Letter."](#)

¹⁹ People's Republic of China, State Council, ["China's Arctic Policy."](#)

²⁰ Global Affairs Canada, ["Diversifying Canada's trade and investment opportunities."](#)

²¹ Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, ["Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade Mandate Letter,"](#) December 13, 2019.

²² Catherine Cullen, ["As Trudeau Campaigns in Africa for UN Security Council Seat, Norwegian PM Is Steps behind,"](#) *CBC News*, February 8, 2020.

²³ P. Whitney Lackenbauer, ["Canada and the Asian Observers to the Arctic Council: Anxiety and Opportunity,"](#) *Asia Policy* 18(1) 2014: 28.

Canada's Arctic Multilateral Experience to Date

Canada has played an important role on the Arctic Council, beginning with its advocacy for the council's creation. With the support of Finland, Canada endorsed the expansion of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy into the Arctic Council and the inclusion of a wider array of Arctic issues.²⁴ This led to the Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council (known as the Ottawa Declaration), signed in Ottawa on September 19, 1996. The agreement included Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States.²⁵

Following the council's formation, Canada continued its leadership position as the council's rotating chair for two years and again from 2013 until 2015. During its second term, Canada emphasized the need for economic development primarily through resource extraction and shipping.²⁶ This led to the creation of the Arctic Economic Council, which emphasizes responsible, sustainable and regulatory-based development,²⁷ and is one of Canada's most significant contributions to the Arctic Council.²⁸ Canada also led initiatives to mitigate the impacts of excessive carbon and methane in the Arctic by addressing oil pollution and supporting nature conservation initiatives.²⁹ Canada's time as chair demonstrated a degree of impact, not only in introducing new initiatives to the council, but also in reinforcing previous mandates.

The future of the Arctic Council and Arctic cooperation will be at its greatest crossroads when Russia takes the chair from 2021 to 2023. This will come at a moment when there has been increasing worry about Russia's military influence in the Arctic,³⁰ as well as its actions in the Middle East and Ukraine.³¹ At the time of writing, Russia is among the nations hardest-hit by COVID-19,³² which, together with the economic damage incurred as a result of oil price wars with Saudi Arabia, has put the country under tremendous economic, social and political strain. Historically, Canada and Russia have had their disagreements, especially over Canada's inclusion of the Ukraine issue during its last term as chair of the Arctic Council.³³ But moving forward on some of these difficult bilateral relationships, which, according to some analysts, require the adoption of a policy of "pragmatic realism,"³⁴ may be best pursued within a less controversial multilateral context, which the council could provide. Russia's leadership could provide Ottawa with an opportunity to increase its role in Arctic affairs by incrementally resetting its relationship

²⁴ Andrea Charron, "[Canada and the Arctic Council](#)," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 67(3) 2012: 766.

²⁵ Arctic Council, "[Ottawa Declaration](#) (1996)," January 1, 1996.

²⁶ Heather Exner-Pirot, "Development or Bust: Canada's Arctic Council Chairmanship 2013–15," in *Leadership for the North: The Influence and Impact of Arctic Council Chairs* (New York: Springer, 2019), 95.

²⁷ Arctic Economic Council, "[About Us](#)."

²⁸ Heather Exner-Pirot, "[Canada's Arctic Council Chairmanship \(2013–2015\): a Post-Mortem](#)," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 22(1), February 2016: 89.

²⁹ Exner-Pirot, "Development or Bust," 97.

³⁰ NATO Parliamentary Assembly, "[NATO and Security in the Arctic](#)," September 6, 2017.

³¹ Andrea Charron, "[NATO, Canada and the Arctic](#)," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, September 2017, 3.

³² Thomson Reuters, "[Russia to Begin Easing Some Lockdown Measures despite Surge in COVID-19 Cases](#)," *CBC News*, May 11, 2020.

³³ Exner-Pirot, "Development or Bust," 100.

³⁴ Fitz-Gerald and Segal.

with the Kremlin and using Canada's strengths to convene dialogue with like-minded partners on the council to help "nudge" larger powers such as Russia. This would give Canada a strategic and important role in Arctic affairs and provide a path toward a more productive relationship with the incoming chair. Engaging Russia in a multilateral manner may also help diversify its Arctic interests beyond a military focus.

Greater deterrence of future military incursions in the Arctic could be considered through a stronger role for NATO in the Arctic, something for which, as a NATO member, Canada could advocate. NATO's expanded role could help enable Canada's wider multilateral security obligations, for which it has received criticism from the United States.³⁵ Norway, like Canada, has been a strong advocate for international peacekeeping and the human security agenda, and has been vocal about an increased role for NATO in the Arctic.³⁶ As most Arctic states are also NATO members, the overlapping membership would enable greater NATO and Arctic cooperation, although any NATO-led activities must be careful not to provoke a Russian response and should instead focus on deterrence.³⁷ Russia should not be made an enemy in these actions, as it has also encouraged greater collective cooperation in the region.³⁸ With prospects of increasing internal strife, Russia is likely to be focused on its own issues and unlikely to engage in major conflict beyond its current military presence in Ukraine's Donbass region. Canada's NATO operations could be broadened toward greater cooperation and deterrence across the Arctic in order to respond to emerging global trends and the very collective security interests that NATO, under Article V of its governing North Atlantic Treaty,³⁹ is meant to protect.

Conclusion

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has not only exposed gaps in Canada's preparedness, but also served as a sobering reminder that we may not be so distant from the next global crisis. Changing political circumstances worldwide suggest that Canada must look beyond its traditional partners in order to effectively and collectively mitigate the effects of climate change at home and abroad.

In this context, and based on the fact that the Arctic region may be affected first and worst by climate change, Canada's post-COVID multilateral posture may be most impactful if it includes a strong Arctic focus. This would ideally be administered through the Arctic Council, an organization that includes like-minded nations sharing Arctic territory and focus, and one in which Canada has enjoyed some traction in the past. Canada would also benefit from working in partnership with states that are not members of the Arctic Council, but that have interests in the region.

³⁵ Andrea Charron, "Canada, the United States and Arctic Security" in [Canada's Arctic Agenda: Into the Vortex](#), edited by Higginbotham and Spence, 93.

³⁶ Rob Hubert, "Canada and NATO in the Arctic: Responding to Russia?" in [Canada's Arctic Agenda: Into the Vortex](#), edited by Higginbotham and Spence, 85.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Anatoly Antonov, "[Russia Stands Ready to Work Together in the Arctic](#)," *Arctic Today*, December 4, 2019.

³⁹ The North Atlantic Treaty underpinned the formation of the NATO alliance in 1949. Article V states that an attack against one NATO member would be considered an attack against all members of the alliance.

The COVID-19 crisis has set the precedent for worldwide collaboration, sharing of best practices and resources, and collective research; the onus is now on multilateral alliances to apply the lessons learned to tackling the impact of climate change. Canada's multilateral posture moving forward must balance populist pressures to revert inward with the need for multilateral cooperation on global issues. An Arctic agenda, pursued by way of a more active engagement in the Arctic Council, would enable a greater voice and potential leadership role for pursuing Canada's climate change objectives. It may also facilitate a less controversial environment to both deepen and reshape important bilateral relationships.





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