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Edited by  
**Dwayne Ryan Menezes**  
**Heather N. Nicol**



# THE NORTH AMERICAN ARCTIC

**Themes in Regional Security**

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*Themes in Regional Security*

Edited by

Dwayne Ryan Menezes and  
Heather N. Nicol

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Chapter Title: North by Far Northwest: Indigenising Regional Policy Innovation in Border Management

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# North by Far Northwest: Indigenising Regional Policy Innovation in Border Management

Christian Leuprecht and Todd Hataley

## 2.1. Introduction

In late-June 1940, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police vessel left the Port of Vancouver on a mission to traverse the Northwest Passage. The ship reached Halifax in early-October 1942. The *St. Roch* became the second ship ever to sail the Northwest Passage and the first to cover the route travelling from west to east. On the return voyage in 1944, it covered the entire distance in a mere 86 days.<sup>1</sup> The aim was to establish Canadian sovereignty across the North, stake a Canadian claim to the North and, by default, the enforcement of a Canadian Arctic or northern border. The geographic nature of borders in the Arctic in general, and the Far Northwest in particular, is quite different from the South, and subject to a greater rate of change due to rapidly evolving geopolitical futures. On the one hand, new technologies, environmental change, resource exploitation and even tourism are challenging how the Canadian government manages and controls the state border across Canada's North and Far Northwest. On the other hand, the quest to establish and manage sovereign Canadian territorial limits across the Arctic remains a challenge. Canadian strategy to establish managed borders in the North has not really evolved beyond the first sailing of the *St. Roch*: transpose a southern border management paradigm on the North. This chapter is about emancipating a more regionally-appropriate border paradigm.

In the process, the chapter makes an example of the northern border as both, foreshadowing the transformation that borders are

undergoing in globalisation long before those effects became as apparent at more frequented borders, and a harbinger of anticipating changes to come and options to prepare and respond. As flows of people, goods, capital, data, pollution and the like become ever more global, the 21st century is shaped by connectivity. Hallmarks of this development include the border shifting beyond the border, both inwards and outwards, as well as greater bilateral cooperation between states. Fundamentally, however, the exponential growth in connectivity across borders means that conventional Westphalian international approaches *between* states are no longer sufficient to govern borders in general, let alone in the North where the state's control of borders has always been tenuous. The governance of borders is increasingly multi-player, involving states, the private sector and the third sector, including, for instance, aboriginal communities who insist on being treated not just as any other stakeholder but as equal sovereign bearers of collective rights and stewards of the environment as well as their people. The 670-kilometre GasLink pipeline, which is now being built across British Columbia to the terminal at Kitimat, is a good example. It succeeded where other pipeline projects had floundered because of an approach to governance that was transnational: it gave aboriginal communities ownership over the process and the outcome, rather than just reducing their position to mere stakeholders in Impact Benefit Agreements.

Governance of the northern border foreshadows the transnationalisation of the way borders are governed. The geospatial value of the North rose abruptly with the advent of nuclear weapons, which are characteristic of an incipient border flow: one that cannot be governed, stopped or mitigated well at the actual border whilst posing an existential threat to the North American continent as a whole, rather than just either the United States or Canada. This gave rise to an unprecedented functional arrangement that shapes the binational relationship to this day: America's only genuinely binational command, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, situated in Colorado Springs – far away from any physical borderline. While the bilateral defence arrangement remained firmly ensconced in *international* relations between two states, the deleterious effects for local communities across the North has become manifest and consequential: from contaminated military sites to the large-scale resettlement of entire communities; effects that are long-lasting, which a more *transnational* approach to governance could have mitigated. Such *transnational* governance is exemplified by the Canadian Armed Forces enlisting local communities in northern defence by establishing, equipping and training aboriginal peoples as part of

the Canadian Rangers. The Rangers were a functional response to the challenges of border policy in the North: vast terrain, few resources and exponential costs made it indispensable to draw on local knowledge and non-state actors.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the literature, policy and practice in managing borders and their integrity in North America is inherently dominated by paradigms from southern parts of the continent, which is where most people live and most goods cross the border. Yet, southern paradigms are either not applicable or ill-suited to managing borders in the North: the type and amount of traffic in people and goods differs in both proportion and absolute numbers; the nature of security threats differs, and the way security and threats are conceptualised by local communities differs; the costs of managing borders in the North are exponentially higher, yet available resources and expertise disproportionately fewer; and the types of assets available fewer and different from those that are commonly used to manage borders elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Many of the challenges, conflicts and vulnerabilities that are documented in other contributions in this volume are, in whole or in part, a function of the indiscriminate importation and application to the North of border management norms and practices that developed elsewhere. The aim of the chapter is to demonstrate how and why northern borders and border integrity differ, and the ineffectiveness, inefficiencies and misunderstandings associated with importing border management paradigms that are insensitive to needs, interests, priorities and values in the North; as well as to build on some of the observations across the contributions to this volume to indigenise border management paradigms. In the process, the chapter endeavours to shift the approach to borders in the North: from the prevailing 'high' border management model that treats all borders alike and represents elite interests from elsewhere in the country to a 'low' border management model that recognises diversity and variation in borders across different regions in Canada and promotes an asymmetric approach that is more sensitive and responsive to local cooperation and co-production of border management and integrity.

The chapter concludes that the story of border building in the Canadian North is an ongoing process that does not follow contemporary bordering theory. In effect, the bordering process in Canada's Arctic is a unique border laboratory: a real-time natural experiment across multiple political, economic and cultural levels. The analysis in this chapter suggests that the push and pull of the bordering process is the story of exogenous and endogenous variables that frame the decision-making environment and constrain available options for building the

Arctic border. The chapter starts with the well-known realist military paradigm of asserting sovereignty in a quintessentially modern fashion to forge a security community. Since the end of the Cold War, however, that process has been undergoing a fundamental transformation incommensurate with what we know from the literature and previous research about border processes. As a result, we are witnessing a genuinely new development that attempts to reconcile 'high' policy priorities of conventional security and national interest with 'low' policy priorities of human and food security, local rights and shared sovereignty, and local economic development.

## 2.2. Canada's Cold War Border

As the *St. Roch* was pulling into Vancouver Harbour in October 1944, the war across Europe and the Pacific was drawing to a close. The end of the Second World War would soon launch upon the world a new type of war: the Cold War, marked by a strategy that delivered nuclear effects predominantly in the air domain by way of bombers, submarines and intercontinental ballistic missiles. Its proximity to Russia transformed the northern periphery into a military front. The geopolitics of the Canadian North cast the region in a new light and imposed on the Canadian government a need to assert territorial control across the North. With Operation Muskox in 1946, an 81-day joint exercise with the Americans travelling across the Canadian low Arctic on snowmobiles, the Canadian government sought to establish an operant military presence in the North.<sup>4</sup>

By modern standards, a small military operation using snowmobiles may seem minor enough, but in the context of the technology of the day and the new geopolitics of the Cold War, Operation Muskox was a deliberate effort to employ new technology to enhance Canada's presence in the North. The snowmobile had been developed not even 25 years earlier, purposefully for recreational and commercial applications, not as a military platform. Yet, realising the importance of being able to exercise control over the Arctic, in what will become a familiar pattern, the Canadian government coopted new technology, along with the military, to project territorial control. The other important piece to this puzzle, of course, was the geopolitical position of North America's allies post-1945. The desire or motivation to exercise control of the Arctic was exogenous to the region. In the absence of an external pressure – the Soviet threat – neither the Canadian government nor its allies would have invested much time or effort in a presence in the Arctic.

Early border literature is replete with examples of borders established for the purpose of ensuring territorial integrity. The Great Wall of China and Hadrian's Wall are good examples from a pre-Westphalian world. However, even in more modern times, states have demarcated and controlled territory through the use of military presence and fortifications. The literature on the early border between Canada and the United States describes the American border as a string of military fortifications supported by a series of military roads for the purpose of resupply and transport.<sup>5</sup> As technology advanced, military roads that supplied those military outposts – such as the Alaska Highway – were replaced with railroads and fortifications along with norms, the rule of law and law enforcement agencies. This evolution of the border between Canada and the United States is not quite as linear as described and did not occur in a vacuum. The United States bordered on British North America. As a colony or set of colonies, the United States had fought a war for independence against the same British rulers. The divestment from military fortifications transpired in a less competitive or acrimonious environment, with the establishment of Canada and the slow evolution towards what Karl Deutsch (1957) famously termed a 'security community'.<sup>6</sup>

Relative to its northern borders, during the Cold War, Canada was confronted with the need to build the fortifications to deny, or at least to monitor, entry to Canadian territory by the Soviet adversary. Canada had to build its border fortifications, complete with military supply roads, in an inhospitable, sparsely-populated part of the world. For Canada, having to build a border for the purpose of territorial defence was new. The border between Canada and the United States did not evolve along similar lines. Canada, as an independent country, never had a fortified border along its southern position. Although the British military had occupied border positions during the British colonial period, this was not a posture that the newly-formed Canada was even remotely capable of holding. For the new Canadian government in 1867, the border would be a mechanism for revenue collection – an economic border.

As the Cold War progressed, Canada doubled down on efforts to develop a fortified northern border. One of the lessons of Operation Muskox was that a Soviet infantry invasion across the Canadian Arctic was unlikely. Regardless, there was a need for permanent human settlement to stake out Canada's sovereign claim, monitor and provide information on security developments in the Arctic. This became the job of the Canadian Rangers, a Canadian Armed Forces reserve programme, that began in 1947. At the outset, the Canadian Rangers were mandated

largely with observing and reporting. They were outfitted with minimal equipment and operated as self-sufficient units. Over time, they have adopted additional mandates, but their principal mission remains unchanged: to observe and report unusual sightings in remote regions of Canada, and to conduct patrols to assert Canadian sovereignty. The Canadian Rangers became the first *de facto* fortification along the northern Canadian frontier. Comparable to the series of military forts along the early Canada-United States border, Rangers and their communities would take on an analogous role along Canada's Arctic border.<sup>7</sup>

However, a few hundred local men, with rifles and some communication equipment from the era of the Second World War, were no match for a potential Soviet force spilling over the Arctic Circle into the North American theatre. Indeed, if Canada was unable or unwilling to build sufficient infrastructure in the North to control the Arctic border, then the job would have to pass to Canada's Cold War ally, the United States. In the mid-1950s, Canada and the United States set about an ambitious infrastructure project to build radar stations along the Arctic border for the purpose of detecting intrusions by enemy forces and deterring the air threat. The development of the Distant Early Warning Line once again adopted technology as the mechanism for monitoring and surveying the northern border. Unlike the southern border, which had evolved along with the post-war United States economy, the northern border remained relatively isolated and difficult to access. That inhospitable environment still required a system to ensure continental defence in the context of the Cold War.

The series of radars that made up the DEW Line and the subsequent creation of North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) created a ring of continental fortifications complete with supply lines from the South to ensure not just the territorial integrity of Canada, but that of the entire continent. To be sure, the motivation for Canada to demarcate and survey its northern border differed only slightly from the original sailing of the *St. Roch* and its sovereignty patrol. As the Cold War ramped up, it was apparent that Canada had a role in continental defence; or the task would fall to the United States alone. The consequences for unilateral American action in the Canadian North would have had substantial consequences for the sovereignty of the Canadian North. For Canadians, playing a role in the military defence of the northern border was essential to maintain a sovereign claim over the region. A binational arrangement on the part of Canada and the United States gave Canada the opportunity to incorporate the newest military technology to support a physical border.

At the same time, as important as the material border was, permanent infrastructure along the border – infrastructure that had a Canadian component in terms of technology, manpower and monitoring – strengthened Canada’s political claim to the North and the northern border as a Canadian border. In the 1950s, just as now, the Canadian claim to a northern border was not globally recognised.<sup>8</sup> Not that many countries were overly concerned about Canada’s northern claim; that issue would become more contentious as the environment and technology changed, creating a more accessible North in the late-1970s and early-1980s. In the mid-1950s, however, Canada did not have sovereignty concerns with regards to a presence of the United States in the Arctic,<sup>9</sup> nor did it appear that the United States had any territorial interest in the North beyond the installation of military monitoring stations for continental defence.

### **2.3. Post-Cold War Border**

The last decade of the 20th century allowed Canada to reconsider its Arctic policy and to continue with the bordering process in the absence of the threat of mutually assured destruction. With military concerns across the region in decline, coupled with new surveillance technology that allowed for a reduced military footprint in the region, Canada expanded its Arctic policy to include the environment, aboriginal peoples’ rights and economic development. That refocused Arctic policy in the 1990s resulted in bordering processes that expanded the number of actors. This was to be a short-lived reprieve from the military activities that dominated Arctic policy after the Second World War. The 1994 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defined new regulations for determining maritime borders, launching claims by five Arctic states over the Arctic territory.<sup>10</sup> Canada, though never alone in its claim to the Arctic, was now faced with claims to the region that were backed by international convention.

### **2.4. The New Cold War Border**

Arctic ice has been melting since the late-1970s, opening areas of the Arctic not previously amenable to commercial and pleasure craft. The melting in the Arctic Archipelago has launched a new round of challenges to Canada’s historic claim to the region, a claim that many

states in the international community have chosen to ignore. In late-2017, the United States began taking proposals for oil drilling off the coast of Alaska where the Northwest Passage begins.<sup>11</sup> Around the same time, the Chinese government sent a research vessel into the region, for the purpose, one can assume, of exploring shipping options through the Arctic region. In early-2018, China announced an official policy on Arctic shipping: it planned to create a new 'polar silk road' through the Arctic trading route.<sup>12</sup>

Ignorance of Canada's claim over the Arctic is not new: American and Russian submarines are known to have been operating under the polar ice shelf for years without permission from Canada. However, the growing number of actors now engaged in an ever-expanding polar frontier, and the associated challenges, sets current circumstances apart. Increased traffic into the Arctic region for the purposes of trade, tourism, resource extraction and to stake a claim to the area engender pollution, environmental and cultural disruption and challenges to local populations that lay claim to the territories of the Arctic. This is over and above the disruption to which local populations have already been subject due to previous Canadian policy in the North. Canada's Arctic policy stresses a historic claim to a clearly demarcated region in the North and lays out a plan for stewardship and development, but with the primary objective of 'high' Arctic policy in the national interest, rather than 'low' Arctic policy to advance local well-being, prosperity and human rights.

In bordering the Arctic, Canada has endeavoured to establish material control over the region, initially by presence and then with permanent infrastructure. In the new Cold War era, Canada has added a second prong to its strategy that includes the indigenous peoples of the North and changing the Arctic narrative – 'Canadians' who have long traversed the region in their traditional ways of life. The Canadian government has long coopted local inhabitants in the sovereignty process. Recall the creation of the Rangers in 1947. However, the new Cold War narrative is different. The new narrative engages, perhaps for the first time, traditional indigenous peoples' culture and lifestyle, environmental stewardship and economic development. Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy clearly articulates this shift: 'The Arctic is fundamental to Canada's national identity.'<sup>13</sup> To reset the global narrative on the Arctic, Canada is attempting to position itself as the traditional custodian of the Arctic, rather than merely its defender.

## 2.5. The Bordering Process in the Arctic

Canada's experience of the bordering process in the Arctic is unique insofar as this may be the only case study in the world where this process can be observed in real time. Analogous to Sack's work on the human endeavour to control space, the Canadian government endeavours to enforce territorial integrity over a vast and sparsely populated region of the world.<sup>14</sup> However, Sack's work does not account for the proliferation of actors. Territorial control or bordering is not a process that is being spearheaded by local populations who inhabit the land, but rather by a distant government whose motivations are ultimately political and not, as Sack suggests, part of local or regional human behaviour. This begs the question of an alternative narrative: how are borders conceived or imagined by the indigenous peoples in Canada's North? Is it appropriate for them to be coopted by the Canadian government as actors in the bordering processes? What we are able to observe in the case of building Canada's Arctic borders is a political process, a process that, contrary to Paasi, is not clearly institutional.<sup>15</sup> In fact, in the Canadian Arctic, borders are being asserted in the absence of a territorial population and institutional structures, but motivated largely by exogenous effects, whilst at the same time limited by endogenous constraints: scarce resources, exorbitant expense, sparsely populated and a rapidly changing environment, both physical and political.

The desire to control territory is part of the human conditions. But contrary to Sack, human territoriality in Canada's Arctic is driven by policy choices not determined by the populations living in the territory and most affected by the building of borders, but rather by political interests and elites far afield from the respective territory.<sup>16</sup> And like any state leadership, the bordering choices made over the years by Ottawa were compelled fundamentally by a desire or need to establish a sovereignty claim to the region. This claim has been made politically in the inter-national community and materially through the deployment of military assets into the region to act as Ottawa's surrogate 'eyes and ears' in the area. Only recently has that strategy changed to include a cultural claim to the area through the presence of Canada's indigenous peoples.

Yet, Canada's Arctic lacks an institutional backdrop to construct the border. Paasi's work on the bordering process suggests that borders are institutional structures that exhibit specific behaviours as they evolve and develop.<sup>17</sup> The absence of an antecedent Arctic border means that its entire development is up for negotiation. So, why did Canadian

policymakers initially opt for a single-pronged military bordering process strategy, followed later by the two-pronged approach that complemented the military border process with a cultural component? The answer may lie in the ideas of the *realpolitik* of territorial control and state building.

Policies are generated in context. As Pierson notes, they frequently are path-dependent institutional structures subject to external pressures for change.<sup>18</sup> Absent the existence of previous institutions, ideas and discourse become the building blocks for new policy structures.<sup>19</sup> In the case of Canada's Arctic borders, sovereignty, in the Westphalian sense of exercising exclusive control over a specific territory, dominated the discourse of the early policymakers. Subsequent to the war period post-1945, territorial integrity, being able to defend one's borders and control access were the dominant ideas in asserting sovereignty. Materialism ruled the day. In their understanding of sovereignty, the early policymakers missed the need for a collective agreement amongst, in this case, state actors that accept sovereign control over the Arctic region and, therefore, are in agreement with the location of Canada's Arctic borders and Canada's northern border strategy. As more actors have emerged, challenging the Canadian claim to the Arctic, Canadian policymakers have simply raised the stakes by developing new arguments to legitimate the Canadian position on the North that incorporate the proliferation of political actors.

## 2.6. Conclusion

Canada's early forays into the Arctic were designed to stave off sovereignty challenges to its claim in the region. More recently, Canadian efforts in the Arctic continue to be, only in a more sophisticated manner, efforts to stave off sovereignty challenges to its claim in the region. The history of Canada's northern border is an ongoing multipronged strategy reacting to exogenous pressures to the region. In many respects, this border is no different than many other borders: it, too, has had to evolve to meet the demands of a changing globe. Post-war Europe, for example, has witnessed a transition from building walls to keep people in to building walls to keep people out. Yet, in other ways, this border is entirely unique insofar as it is not an established institution, evolving in a somewhat predictable manner, nor is it a border being established by a group of people asserting their territorial autonomy. Canada's Arctic border is being built in real time, subject to both endogenous and exogenous pressures as it develops.

The Canadian Arctic, like the Spratly Islands and the Taiwan Strait, will be subject to the realpolitik of state interests and power. For Canada, this simply means that without the capacity to enforce the border, claims to the North will remain just that – claims that are not backed by a capacity to enforce those claims. That history is one of a ‘high’ Arctic strategy forged by political and economic elites in the national interest. Yet, that is no longer a viable strategy on its own. On the one hand, the characteristics and magnitude of connectivity in the North differ from that of the South. First, the nature of flows in the Arctic is emblematic of border challenges more broadly: pollution, environmental change, aero-spatial military challenges, etc. None of these can be adequately addressed by the actual physical Westphalian border. Second, these flows differ qualitatively and quantitatively from movement at the southern border, where priorities include organised crime, migration and cross-border trade. On the other hand, the emancipation and proliferation of individual and collective rights-holders as political actors throughout Canada’s North has meant the exponential growth of actors involved in the bordering process.

This combination of effects obviates a ‘high’ approach by Canada to its northern border: no longer is border policy merely the purview of a relationship between states. It has given rise to an incipient ‘low’ border strategy that has to reconcile the interests of realpolitik with local partners, not only because they are a vital part of that strategy, but also because the political, legal and economic environment necessitates their perspectives and interests to be factored in as equal partners in the bordering process. We are witnessing a genuinely new bordering process that does not conform with the literature: from Sack’s territorial claims to Paasi’s border institutions. The culmination of that process is the genesis of a new form of ‘security community’: one where ‘high’ interests of realpolitik have to be reconciled with ‘low’ security processes that prioritise human and food security along with local economic development for the benefit of local communities.

## Notes

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