

INDIGENIZING NATO

The expansion of NATO in the Arctic has been greeted with enthusiasm by its Arctic member-states. However, states are not the only actors in the Arctic, and there is the real risk of opposition to NATO's ambitions in the Arctic from Indigenous peoples living there. The success of NATO's strategy in the Arctic will depend on its abilities to strike collaborations with Indigenous peoples. The way to do that is to indigenize NATO. Indigenous knowledge ought to be identified as a significant resource which NATO needs in order to be able to operate in the Arctic, and especially Indigenous capacities for resilience can contribute much to NATO's strategy in the region.

Julian Reid*

Keywords: Arctic, Indigenous, Knowledge, NATO, Resilience



TPQ

Spring 2023

* Professor Julian Reid is a Professor of International Relations at University of Lapland.



ATO's military presence in the Arctic is expanding fast in response to the growing importance of the region to Euro-Atlantic security.¹ The establishment of a new NATO Arctic Command is now mooted, designed to 'concentrate the particular expertise, technology, and strategy necessary to operate in this singular threat environment'.²

Arctic states (Russia excluded) are generally enthusiastic about this expansion and keen to contribute. Finland has sacrificed its tradition of non-alignment to join the Alliance, and Sweden is expected to follow. Seven out of the eight Arctic states will then be members of NATO. All of which would seem to strengthen NATO's stance in the Arctic and provide a well of regional knowledge from which NATO can draw in its struggle against Chinese and Russian influence in the region. However, states are not the only actors in the Arctic. One potential "wild card" that NATO may face in the Arctic is Indigenous opposition to militarizing Arctic Indigenous lands. How will NATO face down such likely opposition? Does NATO have a strategy for quelling Indigenous opposition, or is it unaware of this potential risk?

The Risks of Militarization

It would seem evident that NATO will need to forge cooperation with indigenous groups whose territories it wants to increase its presence on. However, there is very little evidence that NATO perceives such a necessity. When NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg addresses NATO's Arctic expansion, he invariably makes no mention of the Indigenous peoples who inhabit it.³ It might, of course, be that NATO feels it already has the support of Indigenous peoples, because those peoples are primarily subjects of Arctic states. However, many Arctic Indigenous peoples would balk at the idea that they are simply part of "our people" who NATO strives to "keep safe".⁴

As such, ignoring Indigenous perspectives could quickly turn out to be a strategic mistake for NATO. The militarization of Indigenous lands is a significant issue for Indigenous peoples worldwide. A report of the United Nations' Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on the impact of militarization on the rights of Indigenous peoples will be discussed in Geneva in July of 2023, when the Expert Mechanism holds its annual session.⁵ Scholars have been drawing attention to the

1) J. Stoltenberg, "NATO is Stepping Up in the High North to Keep Our People Safe," (2022). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_206894.htm

2) L. Mottola, "NATO's Arctic Command: A Case for the Expansion of NATO's Mission in the High North," The Arctic Institute (17 January 2023). <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-command-case-expansion-nato-mission-high-north/>

3) J. Stoltenberg, (2022).

4) J. Stoltenberg, (2022).

5) United Nations, "Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous People," (2023). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrc-subidiaries/expert-mechanism-on-indigenous-peoples>

threats of militarization to Indigenous peoples for some time.⁶ The question arises, therefore of how NATO plans to negotiate Indigenous resistance to its presence in the Arctic.

Representing Indigenous Peoples in NATO

NATO could see its engagement with Indigenous peoples in the Arctic as an opportunity. With the suspension in operations of the Arctic Council,⁷ NATO has the chance to rebrand itself as a space for the representation of the interests of Indigenous peoples. After all, the Arctic Council has been the one major international organization in the Arctic where Indigenous peoples had at least the possibility to make their voices heard. With the damage done to the Arctic Council by severing relations between its Western members and Russia, Indigenous peoples in the Arctic have had no dedicated forum to communicate their needs and interests with Arctic states. NATO could very well use this crisis in the functioning of the Arctic Council as an opportunity to build relations of cooperation with Arctic Indigenous peoples.

“With the damage done to the Arctic Council by severing relations between its Western members and Russia, Indigenous peoples in the Arctic have had no dedicated forum to communicate their needs and interests with Arctic states. NATO could very well use this crisis in the functioning of the Arctic Council as an opportunity to build relations of cooperation with Arctic Indigenous peoples.”

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been met, at best, by responses from Indigenous peoples in the Arctic which are conflicting and ambiguous. The Gwich'in people welcomed the suspension of the Arctic Council and called for the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine.⁸ The Inuit too, accepted the pause, while not offering the same degree of condemnation as the Gwich'in.⁹ The Saami are clearly divided, with the Saami Council suspending relations with Saami groups living in Russia on

6) T. R. Na'Puti, “Archipelagic Rhetoric: Remapping the Marianas and Challenging Militarization from ‘a Stirring Place’,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2019): p. 4-25.

7) O. Young, “Can the Arctic Council Survive the Impact of the Ukraine Crisis?,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (30 December 2022). <https://gija.georgetown.edu/2022/12/30/can-the-arctic-council-survive-the-impact-of-the-ukraine-crisis/>

8) Gwich'in Council, “Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” (3 March 2022). <https://gwichincouncil.com/sites/default/files/2022%20March%203%20GCI%20Statement.pdf>

9) Inuit Circumpolar Council, “Statement from the Inuit Circumpolar Council Concerning the Arctic Council,”

account of their support for Putin's war.¹⁰ The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) has outright supported Russia's war.¹¹ The Aleut International Association has been quiet on the issue but compliant with the Arctic Council's pause. The Arctic Athabaskan Council too, has been quiet, while expressing concern about the impact of geopolitical division on the future of the Arctic Council and the security of Indigenous Peoples, including within Ukraine.¹²

It is already transparent that some Indigenous peoples of the Arctic are circumspect about the impact NATO's increased presence on their lands will have on Indigenous futures.¹³ As the co-chairman of the Gwich'in Council International, Edward Alexander, put it recently:

“When we think about hard security issues whether it is in NATO or the States or Canada – or in Russia – if it does not include Indigenous people at those tables, it is going to have negative impacts and implications for Indigenous people. So, NATO should include us in their discussions...NATO should ensure that they have the consent of the Indigenous people of the Arctic, so things are done ethically. And also, in a way that promotes a better relationship for long-term security”.¹⁴

The Benefits of Collaboration

What are NATO's strategies going to be, then, for inclusion of Indigenous peoples in their plans and operability in the Arctic? In the United States, a clear argument has emerged about the importance of collaborating directly with Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. The talk is about "aligning with and learning from the Indigenous people of the High North and sharing the responsibility for defending the homeland".¹⁵ The rationale for such collaboration is not simply ethics but strategy and tactics. As the argument goes, Indigenous peoples understand the Arctic environment better than anybody, having lived and thrived there for so long, and hence partnering with them is

(7 March 2022). <https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/news/statement-from-the-inuit-circumpolar-council-concerning-the-arctic-council/>

10) J. Last, "The Ukraine War is Dividing Europe's Indigenous People," *Foreign Policy*, 27 June 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/27/russia-ukraine-war-saami-indigenous-arctic-people-norway-sweden-finland/>

11) T. Koivurova, "Is It Possible to Continue Cooperating with Russia in the Arctic Council?" *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, (29 June 2022). <https://gija.georgetown.edu/2022/06/29/is-it-possible-to-continue-cooperating-with-russia-in-the-arctic-council/>

12) Arctic Athabaskan Council, (2022), "Conflict Continues in the Crimean Peninsula, Ukraine,"

(14 February 2022). <https://arcticathabaskancouncil.com/news/2019/3/11/ahi-point-wa-2xhzd-g9x8p>

13) T. Jonassen, "Arctic Indigenous Leaders: We Did Not Shut Down," *High North News* (31 March 2023).

<https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-indigenous-leaders-we-did-not-shut-down>

14) T. Jonassen (31 March 2023).

15) J. R. Morton and R. Burke, "Special Operations Forces and Arctic Indigenous People: Partnering to Defend the North Arctic American Homeland," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (3 October 2022). <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3171534/special-operations-forces-and-arctic-indigenous-people-partnering-to-defend-the/>

said to be essential to the potential for operational success.¹⁶ The extreme cold climate of the Arctic poses particular problems to United States military forces, and the U.S. is keen to learn from the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic how to adapt to it.¹⁷

But will the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic be willing to collaborate? The dominant view of indigeneity today is one of peoples whose ways of life are at odds with western modernity and in conflict with the national interests of powerful western states. For example, we read a lot about the conflicts over land and sovereignty that arise over extractivism.¹⁸ It is easy to imagine that the further expansion of NATO into Indigenous lands in the Arctic will be interpreted as an extension of settler colonialism. In the last decade, for example, NATO has often been criticized for being a colonial entity, in the wake of its invasion of Libya in 2011.¹⁹ It ought to be keen to avoid such accusations in the Arctic, especially if they come from the representatives of the colonized themselves.

“It is easy to imagine that the further expansion of NATO into Indigenous lands in the Arctic will be interpreted as an extension of settler colonialism.”

However, there are reasons to believe that collaboration between NATO and Indigenous peoples in the Arctic could well be successful. It is a fact that, already, of all the different minorities which make up the United States armed forces, Indigenous minorities are among the highest contributors. Alaskan Indigenous are said to contribute to U.S. voluntary forces five times more than any other demographic group.²⁰ There are good reasons for this. Indigenous cultures are defined not only by knowledge of environments, and capacities to survive and thrive in extreme climates, but by immense abilities to wage war and organize violence.²¹ The advance of settler colonialism itself met with fierce military-strategic resistance from Indigenous peoples historically, especially in North America.²² Indigenous peoples such as the Iroquois and the Sioux outfought and outmaneuvered colonial armies from Spain, Britain,

16) J. R. Morton and R. Burke (3 October 2022).

17) J. R. Morton and R. Burke (3 October 2022).

18) A. Willow, “Indigenous ExtrACTIVISM in Boreal Canada: Colonial Legacies, Contemporary Struggles and Sovereign Futures,” *Humanities*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2016).

19) C. Nyere, “NATO’s 2011 Invasion of Libya: Colonial Repackaged?”, in Everisto Benyera (ed.), *Reimagining Justice, Human Rights and Leadership in Africa* (Springer, 2020).

20) J. R. Morton and R. Burke (3 October 2022).

21) R. Chacon and R. G. Mendoza (eds.), *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2007).

22) P. Hämäläinen, *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America* (New York: Liveright, 2022).

France and the Netherlands.²³ Indigenous peoples were adept at using geopolitics to serve their interests.²⁴ Among Arctic peoples too, there is a rich and yet under-researched history of Indigenous warfare, for example between the Inuit and rival Indigenous peoples.²⁵ So, there is every reason to believe that Indigenous knowledge can contribute to the geopolitical and strategic needs of NATO in the Arctic, should it be also in the interests of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous Warfare

Should a direct clash of forces occur between NATO and Russia in the Arctic we could anticipate the high likelihood of conflict between Indigenous peoples of the Arctic once more. The Russian mobilization in Ukraine has involved the participation of a disproportionate number of Indigenous peoples. More than 20 percent of males eligible for military service in some Russian Indigenous communities have been mobilized, compared with just one percent of the total Russian population.²⁶ Of course, it may be that this mobilization of Indigenous peoples to fight for Russian interests in Ukraine is because their vulnerability forces them to comply with Russian state demands. Indigenous peoples in the West are concerned that Indigenous peoples in Russia are being manipulated and forced into silence.²⁷ However, when interviewed directly by independent media, Indigenous recruits to the Russian mobilization from the Nenets people of the Russian Arctic have expressed enthusiasm for their participation.²⁸

In a way it is odd that it should have taken this long for “indigenization” to have become a possible debate for NATO. The trend towards indigenization has been around for a while in international relations and has affected the character of policies of states and international organizations in a wide variety of issue areas, including foreign policy.²⁹ States are keen to maintain international legitimacy for their policies and profiles, and indigenization is identified as a way for them to do so.³⁰ Following suit and doing so ought to be perceived as an open goal for NATO.

23) P. Hämäläinen (2022): p. 86-88.

24) P. Hämäläinen (2022): p. 113.

25) C. A. Bishop and V. P. Lytwyn, “‘Barbarism and Ardour of War from the Tenderest of Years’: Cree-Inuit Warfare in the Hudson Bay Region,” in Chacon and Mendoza (eds.), *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence* (2007): p. 30-57.

26) Indigenous Russia, “Forced Mobilization in Russia among Indigenous Peoples for the War in Ukraine: Open Letter for UN,” (14 December 2022). <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/28697>

27) T. Jonassen (31 March 2023).

28) Cherta Media, 1 September 2022. <https://cherta.media/story/nenec-podpisa-kontrakt-na-vojnu>

29) N. Cochran and B. Harding, “What is Indigenous Foreign Policy? Lessons from Australia and New Zealand,” United States Institute of Peace (2022). <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/what-indigenous-foreign-policy-lessons-australia-and-new-zealand>

30) D. Chandler and J. Reid, *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

Building Resilience

However, it is a thorny question whether indigenous peoples should tolerate the further expansion of NATO in the Arctic and on their lands. At the very least they will need incentives. Of course, it is a fact that Indigenous sovereignty remains limited worldwide on account of the exceptionalism which nation-state governments nearly always apply to their lands in the name of “national security.” But Indigenous peoples are progressively less tolerant of the validity of that argument.

One strategy which would make sense from the perspective of NATO would be to emphasize the importance to its Arctic presence of “Indigenous resilience.” NATO has been gradually developing its interest in the conceptual framework of resilience. It has grown exponentially in importance since the Russian invasion of Ukraine to prepare the peoples and states of NATO for the possibility of various crises, including military invasion.³¹ The Indigenous peoples of the Arctic are commonly said to be exceptionally capable when it comes to being resilient.³² NATO can forge collaborations with the Indigenous by seeking to mobilize their know-how in the Arctic while developing NATO’s Arctic presence. Such collaborations would be entirely compatible with its practice of drawing on the “diverse composition of its member-states”.³³ New member-state, Finland, is already emphasizing its abilities to contribute to the advance of the resilience agenda within NATO.³⁴ Highlighting the particular contributions which Indigenous peoples living in Finland can make to NATO would be an effective way of including them.

Conclusion

NATO is behind the curve when it comes to the indigenization of policies and strategies internationally. Now is the time, as it expands deep into Indigenous territories in the Arctic, for it to catch up with the rest of the world, and forge real and meaningful collaborations with the Indigenous peoples on whose lands it seeks to operate. Not doing so would be to risk policy and strategic failure in the Arctic.

31) J. Reid, “Resilient Ukraine and the Future of War in Europe,” E-IR (17 March 2022).

<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/03/17/opinion-resilient-ukraine-and-the-future-of-war-in-europe/>

32) M. Carson and G. Peterson (eds.), *Arctic Resilience Report* (Stockholm: Arctic Council, Stockholm Environment Institute and Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016).

33) L. Mottola, “NATO’s Arctic Command: A Case for the Expansion of NATO’s Mission in the High North,” The Arctic Institute (17 January 2023). <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-command-case-expansion-nato-mission-high-north/>

34) Ministry of the Interior Finland, “NATO Membership and Finland’s Resilience,” (2023). <https://intermin.fi/en/current-issues/finland-and-nato>