

Canada, the Arctic Circle, and Grand Strategy:
The Need for a Foreign Intelligence Service
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Abstract

Canada, according to James (2024) among other observers, has a grand strategy. However, there is much that the Canadian government can do to improve upon its grand strategy and therefore improve its role in the world. James further notes, “Canada appears to have exhibited an issue-by-issue approach toward foreign policy, rather than anything resembling a well-integrated grand strategy.” The Arctic stands out as such an issue on the Canadian agenda.

We help develop “a well-integrated grand strategy”: the creation of an independent, foreign intelligence service. This would have several advantages for Canada’s future, especially in the Arctic context. These advantages include improving the Canadian role and value in the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance. Additionally, a dedicated, independent foreign intelligence agency would aid Canadian use of the four “instruments” of national power diplomacy, information, military, and economics (DIME). Thus, we argue, stronger Canadian intelligence would strengthen Canada’s grand strategy.

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Grand Strategy

Grand strategy is not a concept naturally associated with Canada, which is identified as a middle power that pursues a limited range of interests. As opposed to pursuit of national interests through *realpolitik*, Canadian foreign policy tends to be linked with multilateral cooperation via international institutions. Rather than examining states like Canada, assessments of grand strategy tend to focus on the leading powers of the international system, with the US as the most frequent subject.¹ Analysis of grand strategy in the context of Canadian foreign policy is not unknown, but the central tendency is to focus on relations with the US, with the comprehensive team effort led by Abelson and Brooks (2024) as the state-of-the-art. Based on a recent review essay, the grand strategy of Canada can be described as issue-based rather than highly-integrated.² And the Arctic stands out as an item of rising importance on the Canadian agenda.³

Why focus on the Arctic in an exploration of Canadian grand strategy? “Since the mid-1990s,” observes Østhagen (2024: 1; see also McCrae 2010: 251), “the Arctic region has risen in prominence in international relations.” The reasons for this development, which impacts upon

¹ For an overview of grand strategy as an evolving concept, see Balzacq (2022). A sample of relatively recent explorations of issues related to grand strategy for the US would include offshore balancing (Layne 2006), resemblance to other great powers in the context of the Persian Gulf (O’Reilly 2008), stability-seeking (Paquin 2010), and credibility and reputation (Harvey and Mitton 2016).

² For a review of the literature on Canadian grand strategy, see James (2024).

³ The Arctic is defined as north of the Arctic Circle (Østhagen 2024: 2). On the evolving nature of Canadian Arctic sovereignty, consult Cavell and Noakes (2010) and Pigott (2011).

Canada significantly, are multiple and interconnected. From the 1980s onward, and likely in connection to climate change, the ice cover in the Arctic declined substantially (Byers 2010: 127; Grant 2010: 435; McCrae 2010: 247; Dalziel 2025; Exner-Pirot 2025). An overall assessment from Griffith (2011: 181; see also Byers 2010: 127, 128; Nord 2010: 120, 135), 15 years ago, seems even more applicable to the Arctic today: “Climate change, the prospect of easier access, and the expectation of long-term growth in the global demand for oil and gas have evoked unprecedented interest from the world at large, and first of all from the attentive publics and decision makers of the eight nations of the region.” Conflict in the Arctic is more likely than in the past due to more contact between and among states (Østhagen 2024: 1; see also Emmerson 2010: 121; Grant 2010: 435) and all of that takes place against the backdrop of a “fiercely competitive and deeply complex multipolar world” (Collins, Majumdar and Miller 2020: 9). Canada, at present, seems unready for what may come next above the Arctic Circle.

This study will work toward a more comprehensive and effective grand strategy for Canada through an argument in favor of a major institutional change: creation of an Independent Foreign Intelligence Service (IFIS). Rapid technological advancement and the uncertainties that accompany it – with AI as only the most obvious example in progress – point toward an IFIS as the only answer to many new questions about policy in the Arctic and beyond. Movement in the direction of an IFIS also would be expedient, given intense pressure from the US on Canada to devote more resources to national security. Under such conditions, Canada “must develop a sustainable Arctic defence establishment” (Coates and Pillai 2025). Accusations of free riding, now out in the open against Canada, become unlikely to dissipate substantially even after the Trump Administration.

Work unfolds in seven additional sections. Section two focuses on the role of intelligence in a general way. The third section covers the role of Canada within the ‘5 Eyes’, notably possible movement beyond status as a net importer of intelligence. Section four concentrates on the connection of a Canadian grand strategy, and its incorporation of foreign intelligence, with the DIME – Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic – elements of national power. The fifth section examines Canada and the US in relation to each other within the context of the Northwest Passage. Section six focuses on potential Russian and Chinese threats in the Arctic in general and matters related to a developing year-round Northwest Passage in particular. The seventh section makes the case for Canada to develop an independent intelligence service in order to achieve a more fully integrated approach toward foreign policy – the best available means toward a grand strategy. The eighth and final section sums up what has been achieved and offers a few ideas for future research.

The Role of Intelligence at a General Level

Espionage and spycraft is an ancient art, with roots in several civilizations (Crowdy 2011). The use of intelligence and espionage in the modern world of Westphalian nation states is also well documented (Rose 2014; Holzer and Gibson 2023; Wakeman 2023). Human, signals, military, and geospatial intelligence are the most commonly referenced forms of collection and many challenges exist for interpretation once information is on hand (Lowenthal 2015). The vast and inaccessible Arctic presents a formidable operating environment, notably for human intelligence.

There are many ways to organize intelligence agencies. Consider the expansive United States Intelligence Community (USIC) as an example. Intelligence can be used to support (i) military tactics on the battlefield and related spaces (various military intelligence agencies); (ii)

the missions of respective departments (e.g., the Department of State has the Bureau of Intelligence and Research; the Department of Energy has the Office of Intelligence and Counterintelligence); and (iii) the work of agencies designed for domestic intelligence operations (the Federal Bureau of Investigation) and foreign intelligence (the Central Intelligence Agency). The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) came into being as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, with a mandate to serve as a figurative umbrella for the vast infrastructure of intelligence already in place for the US.

Intelligence is important for several reasons. Generally, intelligence can support the strategic, tactical, and policy decisions of governments. For example, the USSR and the US depended primarily on the KGB and GRU (USSR) and the CIA (US) to help develop and implement the grand strategies of both nations during the Cold War. Good (military) intelligence also enhances tactics. Furthermore, intelligence can be used to make policy decisions, which is why the USIC provides the Presidential Daily Brief to the President (Priess 2016). It is important to note several problem areas: (a) intelligence is sometimes inadequate, with agencies caught by surprise (the collapse of the Soviet Union famously was not on the CIA's "radar"); (b) used inappropriately (the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003); or (c) designed poorly, with consequence (the Edward Snowden file releases related to the widespread, global surveillance by the United States). There is also the ongoing threat of domestic politics influencing the intelligence process and even a name for it, the "politicalization of intelligence" which commonly refers to influencing the intelligence process or personnel to reach preferred intelligence conclusions in support of favored policy judgments and outcomes (Bar-Joseph 2013).

Obviously, the Canadian intelligence community is smaller than that of the US and other great powers, and would remain so even with the addition of a foreign intelligence agency. We do not advocate that the Canadian government reproduce the USIC, including the intricate organization that follows on from a global range of responsibilities. We do caution, however, that intelligence oversight design matters very much (Gibson 2016; Gibson 2017; Livermore 2009). The problem areas enumerated above, along with domestic politics, will challenge any intelligence community. Expansion of an administrative state also brings about coordination-related challenges, for example, inter-agency rivalries.

Canada and the 5 Eyes: Seeking Status Beyond a “Net Importer”

The “Five Eyes” is an intelligence cooperative agreement that includes elements of Canadian, US, UK, Australian, and New Zealand intelligence communities. While the Five Eyes can be traced all the way back to World War II, the member nations still do *not* share all of their intelligence with each other. This ‘Anglosphere’ thereby approaches, but does not achieve, ‘escape velocity’ from the realist world of interstate competition.

Each of the countries that compose the Five Eyes is also in security relationships with entities that expand well beyond this unit. Those arrangements, importantly, do not always include all five nations. Some examples are as follows: Canada and the US militaries have a relationship with NORAD;⁴ the US, UK, and Australia comprise “AUKUS”; three of the five nations are part of NATO (excluding New Zealand and Australia); and New Zealand and

⁴ Canada recently announced “... the largest investment in NORAD in a generation,” demonstrating the “...strength in defending North America in cooperation with the United States” (“Our North,” 12.).

Australia are bound by a shared military history (ANZACs) and economic relationships. Although there are several reasons to cooperate with each other, it is important to note that individual nations retain elements of sovereignty, and various alliances and other relationships which also ensure that each nation's intelligence services have incentive not to divulge every element of intelligence to their Five Eyes partners.

Limitations on the Five Eyes and other sources provide an important reason for Canada to consider the creation of its own *foreign* intelligence agency. Several reasons stand out.

First, all five nations obviously have overlapping but also somewhat different geographic interests. The UK should be expected to focus on Europe; Australia and New Zealand have an interest in the (South) Pacific region; and the US, while it shares a continent and borders with Canada, has global interests—whether ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and the European continent, or the potential pivot to Asia in the face of Chinese expanded efforts globally. To be sure, there are shared interests (monitoring China, for example) across the Five Eyes partners, but shared interests are not a union of interests. Canada focuses primarily on the northern half of the Western Hemisphere, which includes the Arctic, and is linked very closely to the US as a by-product of location.

Secondly, as noted above, the partners do not always share information and intelligence. When information and intelligence are passed along, it is because the collecting state believes that it is in its national interest to do so.⁵ It is naïve to believe that partnerships equate with the

⁵ Briefly, the difference between information and intelligence is more than semantics. As Lowenthal (2015: 2) describes them: “[i]nformation is anything that can be known, regardless of how it is discovered. Intelligence refers to information that meets the stated or understood needs

same national interest in all cases, so some information is certain to be held back, perhaps even for reasons related to domestic politics. This assertion is evident in the current rift between the United States and Canada on trade issues, for example— greater than ever at this time of writing and complicated by a wide range of bilateral and domestic considerations. It is not impossible that the current US administration will pull out of additional multinational agreements, as it already has suspended almost all foreign aid (Hansler 2025). At the same time, the confrontational approach of the Trump Administration has yielded greater commitments to NATO spending from even the most recalcitrant members of the coalition, so the overall direction of multilateralism would appear to be uncertain at present.

The Trump Administration has not been universally successful in its relationships with allies, however. Reports have emerged early in the current administration suggesting that Five Allies have concerns about sharing intelligence with the United States (Flitton 2025; DeLuce, et al. 2025; Shoebridge 2025). The sources of this reticence are varied. Flitton suggests that the Trump administration has politicized intelligence, something he warns should concern the other four members of the Five Eyes, because “[t]he perceived value of shared secrets goes beyond expanding coverage and insights – it generates a shared worldview among the partners.” Yet, the current administration appears to be at odds with its partners in the Five Eyes.

De Luce and colleagues suggest that Five Eyes partners, and other allies, may be concerned that Trump will use their intelligence to barter with long time adversaries, which may undermine sources and personnel. “Every intelligence agency treats its commitments to foreign

of policy makers *and has been collected, processed, and narrowed to meet those needs*”

(emphasis added; see also Robinson 2009: 704-707).

agents as sacrosanct, pledging to keep agents safe and shield their identities. Anything that jeopardized that obligation would violate that trust, former officials said, and that could lead some spy services to hold back on some information sharing with Washington. ... [M]embers of the ... Five Eyes ... are examining how to possibly revise current protocols for sharing intelligence to take the Trump administration's warming relations with Russia into account."

Although Trump may have soured on Putin and Russia over failed diplomatic efforts to end the war in Ukraine, that should not necessarily mollify fears of Trump oversharing secrets. In his first term, he infamously made Israeli intelligence public to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in an Oval Office meeting. More recently, following fallout from his decision to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities, and reports that those attacks were not as successful as the president claimed, "Donald Trump appears to have blurted out top-secret intelligence on allied operations in enemy territory – again. Reinforcing the reputation of his entire administration as being incontinent with secrets, he twice seemed to suggest at the Nato summit in the Hague that Israel had agents on the ground in Iran assessing the damage done by America's bombardment of Fordow and other nuclear facilities" (Kiley 2025).

Other intelligence watchers share our concern about the propensity of the Trump administration to undermine relations with allies, including Canada. Shoebridge (2025) says straightforwardly, that "[o]ne of the 5 Eyes governments – the US – has an open intention to take over another – Canada – perhaps even by force. Not a great basis for trust and cooperation on the most sensitive of intelligence issues." Furthermore, he suggests that all of the previous concerns may be dwarfed and exacerbated by the reality that Trump and his senior national security officials do not trust the US intelligence community. This mistrust – likely based on the petition about authenticity of the Hunter Biden laptop signed by 52 prominent members of the

intelligence community – may be the root of his willingness to compromise secrets. Such indiscretions can and do include the secrets of allied nations. It certainly has led to the questionable appointments, including the appointment of two conspiracist podcasters to head the FBI. Given ongoing and intense battles with the media, Trump would seem to value loyalty above all else in the choice of subordinates.

Third, even without the strain between Canada and the US, Canada is a “net-importer” of intelligence in the current Five Eyes relationship (Nardi and Tumilty 2024). Robinson (2009), for instance, reported concerns that the relationship between Canada and its intelligence partners may be strained: “Canada risks being seen as a free rider, with the ultimate consequence that allies will cease providing it with [needed] human intelligence (709). He continued, perhaps to allay those fears, by noting that one Canadian scholar suggested that “foreign powers want Canada to remain a net recipient of intelligence, since this gives them some control over Canadian policy” (Robinson 2009: 709). Recipient status may not have been concerning to Canadian policy makers in 2009, but given current rifts and political environments, this is no longer a persuasive argument.

Fourth, Canada has its own interests that should be enhanced by a foreign intelligence agency. Most prominently, perhaps, is its unique—or at least outsized—role and interest in the Arctic. Roughly 40% of Canada is in the Arctic region – the largest single holder of land in the Arctic in either the Five Eyes or NATO. Yet Canadian Arctic sovereignty, in a word, remains “fragile” (McCrae 2010: 254). Moreover, the Arctic continues to open up at “an astonishing rate” (Griffiths 2011: 181). As global, adversarial issues above the Arctic Circle continue unabated, it is in Canada’s interest to have its own “eyes” on the nations who are increasingly competing in that region. This mission should include surveillance and espionage that CSIS

can't, won't, and shouldn't do. And, just because Five Eyes partners have an interest in China globally, that does not equate to shared interest *in the Arctic*. We therefore advocate for a foreign intelligence agency with a specific interest in quelling adversarial interest in the Arctic.

Creation of an IFIS, in turn, would mean that Canada has more, useful, actionable intelligence that it can utilize to inform its strategic, tactical, and policy decisions. And, as it relates to its allies, Canada could become a more equitable member of the Five Eyes—and help its partners to counter shared adversaries globally.

Ideas for expansion of the Canadian security infrastructure, pointing toward creation of something resembling an IFIS, have appeared at various times. For example, Griffiths (2011: 218-220) maps out an elaborate Canadian Arctic strategy that includes appointment of a Secretary of State for the Arctic in DFAIT. These admonitions, however, have not caught the eye of the government at the time. A greater sense of urgency appears in the exposition of Collins, Majumdar and Miller (2020: 19, 20), which described foreign policy as “adrift by 2020” as a result of “bureaucratic apathy” and “centralization of power within the Prime Minister’s Office.” More specifically, Collins et al. (2020: 23) call for creation of a National Security Council; Canada should become a “better intelligence creator than consumer” and “clearly mandate formal overseas intelligence collection”. “By introducing the discipline of strategic thinking around Canada’s strategic ambition,” according to Collins et al. (2020: 26), “the country can succeed in making the conversion from middle to major power in the decades to come.” Capacity to act therefore would be more in line with rising prominence for Canada as a world leader in natural resources, notably in the Arctic.

Canada, Grand Strategy, Intelligence, and the DIME

Nations have long been understood to have four “instruments” of national power—Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME). Without a dedicated IFIS the Canadian government is limited in its projection and use of DIME: “The use of information as an instrument of national power is one of the most crucial, cost-effective, and practical means of furthering [national] interests.... This includes the military’s information operations campaigns but also goes well beyond as it supports policy objectives across all domains simultaneously” (Higgins 2021: 65). The preceding point about the cost-effective nature of intelligence is an important consideration for Canada, especially in light of its recent economic downturn—and economic pressure by the (second Trump) US administration. Said differently, as Gibson (2015) suggested, a country might consider a “shift [in] spending from military hardware to developing experts in global and regional history, languages, cultures and religions. Smarter spending is key to ... military and intelligence capabilities. And for minimal costs, maximum benefits can be reaped.” Each of the DIME elements of national power will be considered in the context of a Canadian grand strategy and the role of intelligence within it, notably in connection with the Arctic. Put simply, what does Canada need to know – and do – about DIME?

The recognition that diplomatic efforts need to be increased and improved are among the activities at the forefront of improved Canadian security and national power. “Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy,” an interagency white paper, specifically recognizes the role of diplomacy in “leveraging” national security, especially in the Arctic. As part of this process, Canadians will triple the diplomatic budget between 2015 and 2030 (17). This effort includes opening consulates in Anchorage, Alaska and Nuuk, Greenland. While the consulates have a multipronged mission, one of the explicit goals in Alaska is the promotion of “trade and economic ties between

Canada's territories and provinces and Alaska" ("Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy" 28). The new consulate also would create greater capacity for intelligence gathering.

Canada has begun to build out its military ("Our North" 2024). Along with its NATO allies, Canada has committed to increasing its military budget, and one of the key areas that needs to be strengthened is in the Arctic. According to the Department of National Defence, the increased military budget will "... place particular focus on defending the Arctic ... and its approaches against new and accelerating threats through credible deterrence... [and] secure *our* Arctic and North by increasing the presence, reach, mobility and responsiveness of the Canadian Armed Forces in the region, and along our coasts and maritime approaches" ("Our North," 11; *our* emphasis). New tensions with the US further justify a significant movement away from the near-zero spending, in both absolute and relative terms, from a state with such a large expanse and sensitive geostrategic position.

Canada's Department of National Defence understands the need to increase its intelligence capabilities. Accordingly, it is preparing to "... establish greater presence, reach, mobility, and responsiveness across Canada, including our Arctic, through [among many other complementary efforts] enhanced foreign intelligence capabilities" ("Our North," ix). While it is noteworthy that the government seeks to improve and expand its "foreign intelligence capabilities," we advocate strongly that in the long term, the single best action to take is to create a Canadian IFIS, with the sole mission to "enhance" Canadian foreign intelligence.

The Northwest Passage: Canadian and US Views

Canada and the US have a long history of security cooperation.⁶ Allied in both World Wars I and II, these states have many security-related agreements in place. NATO and NORAD are only the most prominent examples. Points of disagreement also exist. At the top of the list among issues in the Arctic, especially in light of trends in climate, is the question of the Northwest Passage. “The longest-standing dispute in the North American Arctic”, according to Grant (2010: 449), “is the status of the Northwest Passage”, which Canada claims as an internal waterway. Canadian assertion of the “sector theory” goes back to 1911 – straight baselines would mean that Arctic waters are not international (McCrae 2010: 245). Fast-forward to the present, however, and Canada still has failed to obtain support for its position about straight baselines around Arctic Archipelago (Lajeunesse 2016: 290). Notably, the US continues to oppose the Canadian interpretation.

Multilateralism seems unlikely to provide a pathway for Canada to deal with concerns about a Northwest Passage, especially given that the US is on the other side of the issue. Multilateralism is challenged significantly because the subversion of international organizations by authoritarian states and increasing US aversion to taking on “a leadership role in the maintenance of the rules-based international order” (Devlen and Miller 2020: 2, 3). Instead, the US seems to be engaged selectively, for example, taking the lead in the Abraham Accords but not in other areas (Collins, Majumdar and Miller 2020: 10). In addition, as Devlen and Miller (2020: 4) observe, the COVID-19 crisis revealed dysfunction of many IOs (e.g., WHO). Effective

⁶ For a thorough review of issues under the rubric of Canada-US defence cooperation, see Lagassé (2014).

Canadian management over issues related to the Northwest Passage, in all likelihood, must start in a bilateral and inherently disadvantageous way with the US.

Canadian Arctic policy goes back to the Klondike Gold Rush in 1897-8, when many Americans arrived in the Far Northwest and represented, at least to Ottawa, a threat to sovereignty (Coates and Pillai 2025). Canada and the US settled the resulting land-based dispute in the far north – over the Alaska boundary – via arbitration in 1903.⁷ “Disagreement with the US over Arctic sovereignty, in spite of many other accumulating mutual interests,” James (2012: 69) observes, “occurred sporadically throughout the twentieth century and continues to this day.” Two incidents stand out along that pathway.

Canadian concerns about the Northwest Passage increased significantly after the voyage of the *SS Manhattan* in 1969. Humble Oil sent that icebreaking tanker to assess feasibility of the Northwest Passage. This event stood about as the first material challenge to Canadian sovereignty from the US that focused on the Northwest Passage and caused tensions to rise (McCrae 2010: 24; Coen 2012; James 2012: 72; Lajeunesse 2024: 256). After an interlude and change in governing party, US-related Canadian concerns about Arctic sovereignty in general and the Northwest Passage in particular returned to the forefront in 1985. The voyage of the US Coast Guard cutter *Polar Sea* into the Beaufort Sea that year has been described as an “intrusive” event that “altered political calculations” about the Northwest Passage (Griffiths 1987: 241; see also McCrae 2010: 246; James 2012: 74; Lajeunesse 2024: 256). The *Polar Sea* excursion has been called “[t]he most direct challenge to Canada’s sovereignty in Arctic waters” (“Conflict and geopolitical issues” n.d.).

⁷ For an authoritative account of the Alaska Boundary dispute, see Munro (1970).

Canada and the US signed an Agreement on Arctic Cooperation in January 1988, with interpretation of its contents summed up as “a bit of a balancing act” (Lajeunesse 2024: 271). This balancing act between Canada and the US in the Arctic may be imperiled, however, as ongoing issues continue. The US has been using freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in the South China Sea since 2015 (Freund, 2017). US FONOPS are designed to “‘preserve and enhance navigational freedoms’ necessary for U.S. maritime mobility” (Overfield 2021, 2). Because the US disputes the Canadian claims of the Northwest Passage as internal Canadian waters, it is quite conceivable that the US Navy may begin FONOPS in the Canadian Arctic region. In fact, during the first Trump administration, the then-Secretary of the Navy Richard V. Spencer explicitly said as much (*ibid.*, 1). US FONOPS could be used to further protest Canadian legal constraints on commercial and non-Canadian military vessels (*ibid.*, 7). While Canada and the United States have long found the balance in their competing interests in the Arctic, there is strong ongoing evidence that suggests that there may soon be an adversarial tipping point between the two nations.

Russia and China in the Arctic: Strategic Considerations for the US and Canada

With the return of President Donald J. Trump to the White House, Greenland comes back into prominence as a point of contention among the great powers.⁸ Denmark, a middle power at

⁸ During his first term in office, Trump “offered” to buy Greenland from Denmark. Denmark refused, and Trump was often mocked for this idea. For example, the Prime Minister of Denmark called the idea “absurd” (Pengelly, 2019). After his election in 2024, Trump has expressed continued interest in Greenland (Schifrin and Warsi, 2025). However, the president’s language

best, is nominally in control of Greenland. However, as the 21st century unfolds and consciousness rises about newly available resources coming to the surface via climate change, the status quo is unlikely to hold. Even before coming back into office, Trump on the campaign trail looked toward the possibility of Greenland joining the US and, at the very least, accepting a greater military presence. Trump also emphasizes the importance of access for the US to strategic minerals in Greenland.

Given the seemingly divided sentiments among Greenlanders, it is impossible to know where all of that is headed. Will, as Buchanan and Sokolov (2025) ask, potential militarization of Greenland by the US tend to encourage a closer alignment of Russia and China with each other? It is impossible to answer that question now, but greater US attention to Greenland is certain to attract interest and possibly stimulate cooperation among other great powers (Buchanan and Sokolov 2025).

Russo-Western relations have deteriorated from 2014 onward and that impacts significantly on the security dynamics of the Arctic (Østhagen 2024: 10; see also Fergusson 2022: 2). Russian Arctic territory, as Østhagen (2024: 3) observes, makes up about one-third of the entire landmass in the region. In addition, most Russian oil and gas reserves are located in the Arctic (Exner-Pirot 2025). It therefore is not surprising to see an increase in Russian Arctic military investments that reflects strategic competition with NATO (Østhagen 2024: 12). Russia, in turn, is the primary threat to Canada in the Arctic and status quo actions must be deemed

regarding acquisition of Greenland has become more aggressive, saying that he would not rule out the potential of using military force to wrest control of Greenland (Yeung and Blackburn 2025).

insufficient (Dalziel 2025). Domestic politics, however, stand in the way of effective response because of the lack of concern among Canadians about national defense (Coates and Pillai 2025). Reluctance to divert spending away from social programs plays an ongoing role in dampening down any proposed shift of resources toward military purposes.

Up to this point in the 21st century, it is reasonable to assert that the rise of China stands out as the single most impactful development.⁹ This ancient and now reinvigorated state is identified as the basic rival of the US-led Western coalition. China is emerging as actor in the north through expansion of scientific research and investment in Russian fossil fuel industries (Østhagen 2024: 15). China, as Østhagen (2024: 15) observes, released a policy statement in January 2018 and self-identifies as “near-Arctic state”.

The Russian and Chinese threat is not a hypothetical. According to the Department of National Defence, “Canada’s Northwest Passage and the broader Arctic region are already more accessible, and competitors are not waiting to take advantage—seeking access, transportation routes, natural resources, critical minerals, and energy sources through more frequent and regular presence and activity. They are exploring Arctic waters and the sea floor, probing our infrastructure and collecting intelligence. ... [D]espite not being an Arctic nation, China seeks to become a ‘polar great power’ by 2030 and is demonstrating an intent to play a larger role in the region” (“Our North,” 4; Adler 2025).

⁹ For a summary of the vast literature on the rise of China and its potential implications, see Gartner, Huang, Li and James (2021).

In addition to the ongoing and rising interest of Russia and China in the region, conflict in the Arctic is a concern because of the proximity of all of the Arctic nations. In larger oceans, interests are generally spread out.

(Image 1 about here) (Arctic Portal 2023b)

In the Arctic, the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of each nation may lead to additional conflict because of the proximate borders and the numerous EEZs that major current and future shipping lanes in the Arctic cross.

(Image 2 about here) (Arctic Portal 2023)

EEZs are defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and they recognize a nation's resource rights to 200 nautical miles (370 km) from its immediate coastline.

Despite the general global consensus regarding UNCLOS—though it is important to note that although the US abides by the Convention, and uses frequent freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), as discussed elsewhere in this paper, it is not an UNCLOS signatory—there are increasing concerns that an “emboldened” Russia “is inclined to test the limits international law imposes on its unilateral powers” (Bartenstein, Dremluga, and Prisekina 2022: 353). Coupled with increased Chinese interest in the region, heightened security concerns are prevalent for Canada and its allied nations. According to a RAND report, “National defense threats to European Arctic states and their investments are primarily driven by their proximity to Russia. The accession of Sweden and Finland to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has multiplied the obligations of NATO Arctic states in the event of conflict. Moreover, the US Department of Defense sees China as a potentially destabilizing force in the region” (Pezard et

al. 2025: 20). Thus, not only are Russia and China becoming increasingly involved in the Arctic, nations with their own Arctic presence have been added to the NATO mutual defense pact, in large part in response to Russian military force in Europe. The Arctic is rising as a cauldron of conflict.

The Case for an Independent Canadian Foreign Intelligence Service

The need for a Canadian foreign intelligence service has been debated for decades (Livermore 2009, 2014; Robinson 2009). During the Cold War, the Royal Mounted Canadian Police (RCMP) was primarily responsible for intelligence. This changed somewhat in the 1980s with the creation of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), which expanded intelligence capabilities by including priority operations in “terrorism, WMD [weapons of mass destruction] proliferation, espionage and foreign interference, [and] information and security threats.....” (Lowenthal 2015: 480).

Presently, CSIS plays a limited international intelligence role. As described by its website (Canadian Security Intelligence Service 2024): “Information on global trends that might have Canadian security implications are collected by security liaison officers posted at Canadian diplomatic missions abroad. These officers consult with foreign police and security intelligence agencies, collect and analyze open-source information, and conduct security screening assessments of prospective immigrants and visitors.” While CSIS does have some human intelligence (HUMINT) capability, its mission is to collect that intelligence to protect the nation. A foreign intelligence service’s HUMINT “would ... be able to collect human intelligence overseas on economic, political, and other issues deemed to be in some way advantageous to Canadian interests, even when no security threat is involved” (Robinson 2009, 704).

There are at least two reasons why CSIS is not equipped to maintain the rigors of foreign intelligence collection and analysis. The first reason is that legal constraints do not, and likely would not, allow for CSIS's mission and mandate to be expanded thusly. Presently, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service Act (§ 16.1.1) allows for "... the collection, from within Canada, of information or intelligence that is located outside Canada if the assistance is directed at a person or thing in Canada or at an individual who was in Canada and is temporarily outside Canada." Additionally, CSIS is constrained by a requirement to obtain a judicial warrant "...to investigate, within *or outside* Canada, a threat to the security of Canada or to perform its duties and functions" (§21.1, our emphasis). Moreover, there is a 2023 Federal Court decision admonishing CSIS for laxity in following this requirement, indicating that the issue of CSIS overbreadth is fresh in the minds of the Canadian government, and likely the Canadian public (Crampton, CJ 2023; see below for more discussion on the importance of the views of both).

A second reason that CSIS is not the proper agency to serve a foreign intelligence service is that modern democracies default to a bifurcated intelligence agency model. As noted above, allied nations like the US and the UK—and even an authoritarian adversary such as Russia—recognize the value in having separate agencies for domestic and foreign intelligence. Not only is this the norm for larger countries, but it is also the norm for countries like New Zealand, itself a peer Five Eyes member (NZIC), but also for many peer democracies, including for example, Austria and Norway. Although Canada could forge its own path, we suggest that the easiest path to effectively design a successful IFIS, that adheres to democratic norms, would be to learn lessons from its allied and peer nations. Indeed, Gilmour (2025) suggests that Canada would be wise to import US intelligence coordination models to "integrate intelligence into our political decision-making process."

Canada has failed to establish an IFIS, though debates occurred in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the realization after 9/11 (and Canada's role in the subsequent US-led Global War on Terror) that Canada was unaware of the threats it faced due to global terrorist efforts (Wark 2024). Andrew Brunetti suggests that "Canada's intelligence community and policy-makers have often had to tread a fine line, balancing the need for intelligence to support government operations with a political culture that has traditionally viewed intelligence with at best with apathy, and at worst suspicion" (as quoted in Gilmour 2025). Similarly, consensus is that "Canada is unlikely to implement such a major reform for the foreseeable future due to ... political concerns that foreign human intelligence gathering would not be acceptable to much of the Canadian public" (Juneau and Cravin 2021).

Based on the decades-long reticence to create an IFIS, illustrated and perhaps coupled with the lack of support by both the elected officials and the public, it is extremely unlikely that creating a foreign intelligence mission for CSIS—which already has domestic surveillance capabilities – would be deemed acceptable in the near future. Distrust will not simply abate, even if the need for an improved and expanded foreign intelligence capabilities becomes evident.

In addition, the Communications Security Establishment Canada (CSEC), established in 1946, is responsible Canadian signals intelligence (SIGINT) (Lowenthal 2015: 481). And, while Canada did have international intelligence related to counterterrorism threats, including in Afghanistan (Robinson 2009), that was based on the battlefield needs of its military troops, and was primarily provided by its military intelligence units (Lowenthal 2015).¹⁰ As those internal

¹⁰ For an authoritative treatment of the Canadian role during the long war in Afghanistan, see Saideman (2016).

operations have ceased, the foreign intelligence missions and capabilities have similarly retrenched.

Despite 2006 campaign promises, the Conservative Party did not take steps to create a foreign intelligence service (Robinson 2009, 703)—so there has been a recognized need by the party to establish the framework for such an agency. The government of Stephen Harper did release a northern strategy in July 2009. Critics, however, called it a “shopping list” of military initiatives – not a coherent vision for Northern policy (Lackenbauer 2011: 423, 427-428). Emmerson (2010: 122) summed the situation at the time, which has not changed much, quite effectively: “Canada’s military and civilian capacity to monitor and control its vast Arctic hinterland has not kept pace with rhetoric in Ottawa or the concerns of national security experts that the country is ill-prepared for the challenges of a more accessible Arctic.”

Neither security in general nor the Arctic in particular seized the attention of the now-departed Trudeau government. Not to be too political, but as the Canadian government transitions from a Trudeau-led government—there is political potential for the renewal of the creation of such an agency. A Conservative return to power, coupled with the increasingly troubled relationship with the United States, as well as ongoing interest in the Arctic by increasingly potent economic and military forces (especially those of the Chinese), would have pointed toward a unique time in Canadian security organizations. However, the unexpected election of Mark Carney as Prime Minister in 2025 – principally a by-product of Canadian anger against Donald J. Trump – makes the situation more difficult to map out than otherwise.

Skepticism about a Canadian IFIS is well-established, with a deep figurative ‘root system’. Anti-American nationalism is fundamental to Canadian elites and underlies opposition

to virtually anything that might increase resemblance to the US. Calls for creation of an IFIS are likely to stimulate visions connected to the perceived excesses of American foreign policy in general and the CIA in particular. Counter-arguments to an IFIS in the public domain, however, would be likely to focus on expenditures, which would be significant. For example, Livermore (2009, 5) argued that “[t]he budget for [a foreign intelligence agency] would be high, and it would take at least five years, if not longer, for such an entity to begin producing even a modest stream of useful reporting. It would never produce, nor would it ever come close to producing, enough intelligence to wean [the Canadian government] from heavy dependence on the American CIA or the British SIS.” Perhaps. But nearly two decades after this position was staked, no such agency exists.

Furthermore, the argument that allied nations’ IC services will continue to cooperate with the Canadian intelligence needs is, at best, questionable. As Livermore (2014) notes a few years onward, there are real world concerns in a democracy about how to manage domestic and foreign intelligence agencies. Simply put, he notes correctly that “Canadians ... should know that every major democratic country with intelligence interests at home and abroad assigns its respective domestic and foreign operations to different agencies.... There is good reason for this. Putting them in one big agency with gigantically intrusive powers...” can be dangerous, and lead to democratic norm reduction, concerns over the potential for use and abuse of information gathered. While we strongly advocate for the creation of an IFIS, we also recognize the political and cultural importance of maintaining rigorous adherence to the protections of Canadians domestically.

Summing Up and Moving Forward

Creation and implementation of an effective grand strategy for Canada, with a coherent vision for the Arctic, will require an IFIS. Canada, for many years, has existed as a junior partner in the Five Eyes and must ‘see’ more on its own. This new reality is a product of several external factors, including no less than increasingly tenuous (and occasionally confrontational relations from the United States), caution about broad intelligence sharing from traditional allies, increased adversarial interest and activity in the Canadian Arctic region from Russia and China, and the impact of climate change on commercial—and military—use of the Northwest Passage as the route becomes more accessible to international use.

No doubt, the creation of a new Canadian IFIS will take additional resources, including time, money, training, expertise, and space. This truth is not a reason to fail to implement the new intelligence agency—it is a clarion call to begin efforts *now*, so that the agency will be fully functional when the lens of its imperative mission is required. In our view, there is a good chance that Canada and the US will revert to the allied status quo of the last century of security cooperation (see Odgaard 2025; “Our North”). While this would mitigate one seeming security concern, others remain—including the impact of climate change on the Arctic generally and within land and sea claimed by Canada. And, there are few reasons to believe the threat from China and Russia abates any time soon. There appears to be every reason to begin now to reap the benefits of improved foreign intelligence by creating a new IFIS agency.

While many possibilities for future research could be enumerated at this point, two will be offered as examples.

First, what form might an IFIS take? Depending on the answer to the preceding question, which cabinet minister(s) would be most likely to oversee it (and why)? Relatedly, how would Parliament assign oversight within and among its committees? Would the IFIS concentrate on

human or other forms of intelligence and, once those queries are answered, what would be the start-up and annual costs? Many other questions might be posed, but those are just a few that require responses.

Second, in seeking insights for a new IFIS, what might be learned from members of the Five Eyes and possibly other national models? Are there other self-designated middle powers that might be worthy of particular attention? Once again, many other queries might be posed, but answers to those immediately preceding would seem essential if the IFIS is to move forward from an idea to a reality in the best possible way.

Image 1:

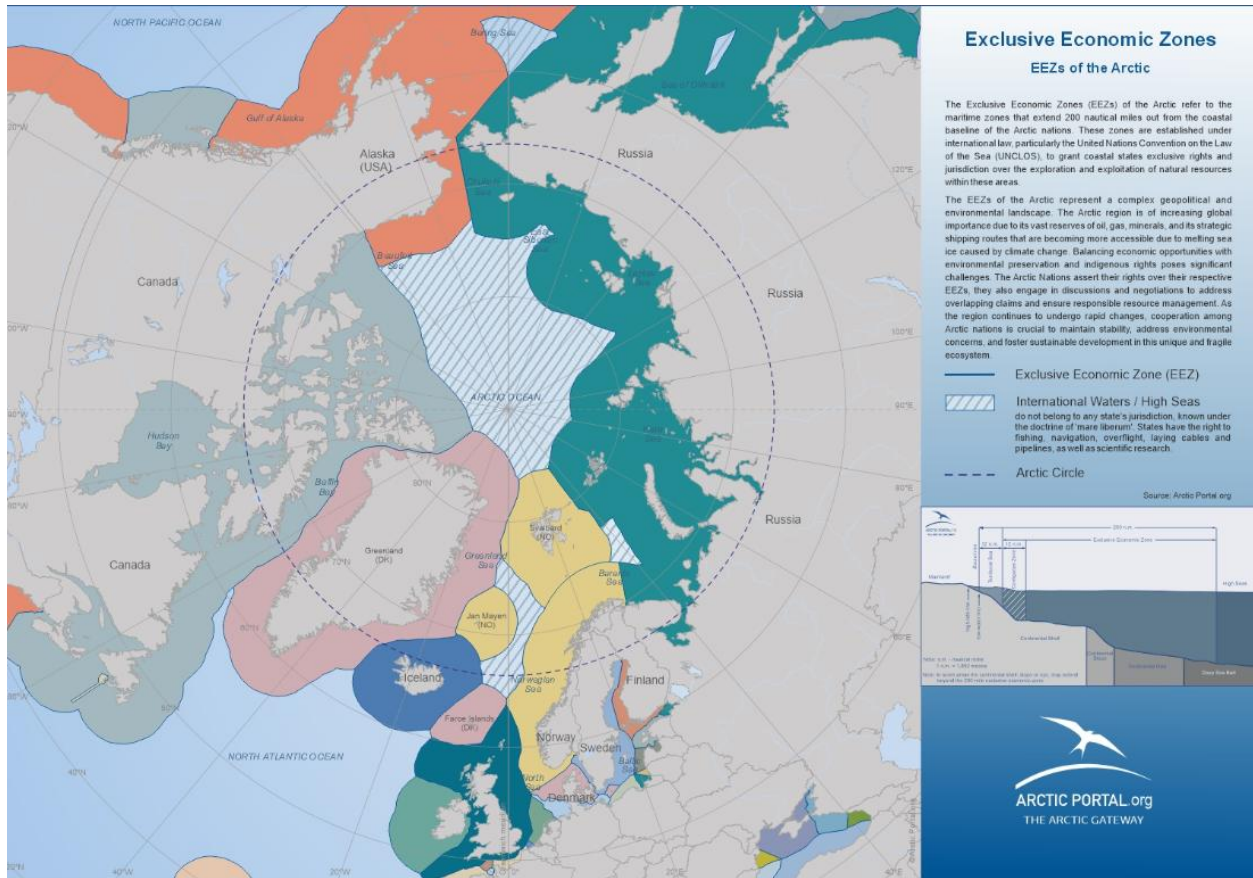
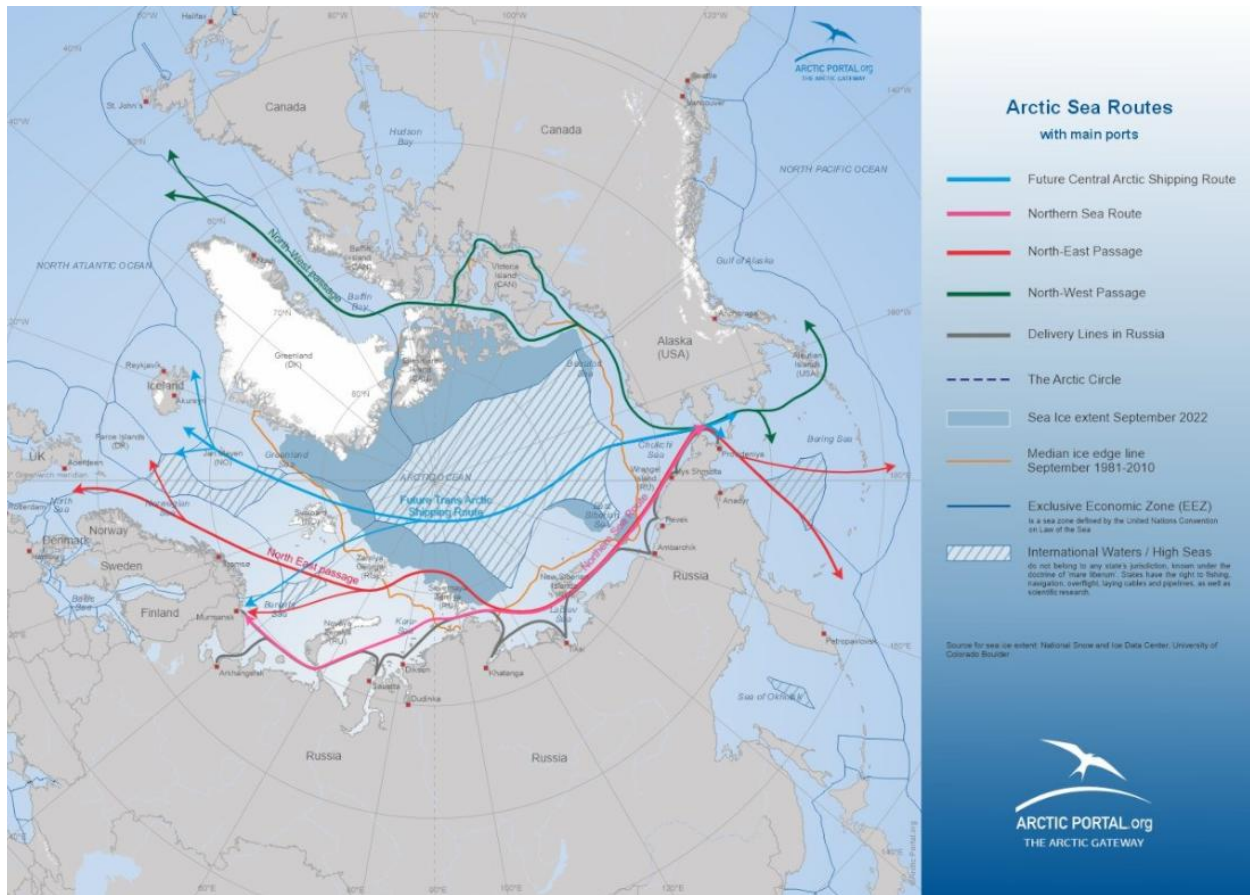


Image 2

DO NOT



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