

Indigenous-Led Arctic Sovereignty and Climate Security in a Shifting US-Canada Strategic Landscape

Workshop-1



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POLICY REPORT # 1

Indigenous-Led Arctic Sovereignty and Climate Security in a Shifting U.S.–Canada Strategic Landscape (ICASUS)

A Policy Analysis, Research, and Interactive Seminar (PARIS) Initiative

Organized by the Conflict and Resilience Research Institute Canada (CRRIC)

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Executive Summary

This policy paper distils the findings of the ICASUS workshop — *Indigenous-Led Arctic Sovereignty and Climate Security in a Shifting U.S.–Canada Strategic Landscape* — held on March 31–April 1, 2026 at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The workshop was funded by the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program of the Department of National Defence, Canada, and organized by the Conflict and Resilience Research Institute Canada (CRRIC).

The seminar brought together Indigenous leaders, defence scholars, climate scientists, government officials, and community advocates for a structured conversation about what Arctic sovereignty, security, and resilience actually look like when viewed from the ground up. The discussion used the PARIS methodology — Policy Analysis, Research, and Interactive Seminar — a distinctive approach that deliberately moved the conversation across disciplinary boundaries rather than keeping it inside any single frame.

Twenty-five consolidated themes emerged from the seminar sessions. They do not form a checklist. They form an argument. That argument, in plain terms, is this: Canada cannot secure its Arctic by hardware alone, and it cannot claim sovereignty over a region whose communities are under-served, under-consulted, and under-resourced. The strongest model that emerged from the workshop is relational and co-productive. It places Indigenous knowledge, community authority, ecological stewardship, and trust-based partnership at the centre of Arctic governance — not as add-ons, but as foundations.

Key findings include:

- Climate change is not a separate entity. It is a total systems condition that cuts across food, travel, health, infrastructure, defence, and daily life in the North.
- Sovereignty in the Arctic is increasingly understood as lived capacity and self-determination, not just jurisdiction or patrol presence.
- Defence priorities and northern community priorities overlap only partially. One cannot substitute for the other.
- Consultation as currently practised is widely seen as inadequate. Communities are calling for co-design from early stages of planning.
- Rotational military and government presence erodes trust. Continuity and local representation build it.
- Indigenous knowledge is operational knowledge — essential for safe movement, ecological judgment, and sound decision-making — not a symbolic courtesy.
- Canada faces a serious strategy-delivery gap. Plans exist; credible execution does not.
- Northern youth training, prevention-based investment, gender-sensitive planning, and ecological stewardship are not secondary concerns. They are the conditions on which any credible Arctic strategy depends.

The paper concludes that Arctic policy will be strongest when it is built *with* communities rather than delivered *to* them. As one participant put it: “The military, government, and Indigenous communities should be in the same boat.”

1. Background

1.1 The ICASUS Project

ICASUS is funded by the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program of the Department of National Defence (DND), Government of Canada, and organized by the Conflict and Resilience Research Institute Canada (CRRIC).

The project responds to a straightforward reality: Canada's Arctic is changing faster than policy can keep up. Climate disruption, geopolitical competition, infrastructure gaps, and the enduring marginalization of Indigenous voices in defence and sovereignty discussions all demand a new kind of conversation — one that starts from the North rather than about the North.

1.2 The Workshop

The first ICASUS workshop was held on March 31 – April 1, 2026, at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, and Mediation Services, Manitoba, Canada. The choice of venue was deliberate. Holding a security and sovereignty conversation inside a museum dedicated to human rights signalled that this discussion would not stay within conventional defence boundaries.

The workshop unfolded over two days and featured keynote addresses, thematic presentations, breakout discussions, and interactive dialogue sessions. It was designed to bring together voices that do not always sit in the same room: Indigenous leaders and Elders, military officers, Arctic scholars, climate scientists, government officials, and community advocates.

1.3 The PARIS Approach by CRRIC

One of the most distinctive features of this workshop was its methodology. ICASUS adopted the PARIS approach: Policy Analysis, Research, and Interactive Seminar. This was not a conventional academic conference where presenters deliver papers and audiences listen. Nor was it a government consultation where decisions have already been made and community input arrives at the tail end.

PARIS is built on a simple conviction: the best policy thinking happens when analysis, evidence, and lived experience collide in the same conversation. The event deliberately moved across four registers:

- Policy Analysis — examining what current frameworks get right and where they fall short.

- Research — bringing empirical and scientific evidence into direct dialogue with community knowledge.
- Interactive engagement — creating structured space for disagreement, challenge, and shared problem-solving.
- Seminar-style deliberation — allowing themes to surface organically rather than forcing them into predetermined boxes.

The result was a conversation that included multi-dimensional and multi-level inputs. Defence experts heard directly from Elders. Climate scientists sat beside community advocates. Government officials were challenged on implementation timelines by people who live with the consequences of delay. This cross-pollination is what gives the ICASUS findings their depth and, frankly, their credibility.

In short, PARIS turned the usual hierarchy of expertise on its head. It treated every participant as a knowledge holder, and it treated every session as a chance to reshape the question, not just refine the answer.

2. Speakers and Contributors

The workshop brought together a remarkable cross-section of people with different expertise and lived experiences. The following individuals contributed as speakers, session leads, and participants. Their collective knowledge - spanning Indigenous governance, defence studies, climate science and adaptation, community advocacy, and public policy - shaped this entire paper. You can find the list of the participants at the end of this document. However, some of the highlights of the distinguished speakers in central presentations are appended below:

Hon. Minister Mike Moyes, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Province of Manitoba

The minister, in his opening remarks, said Manitoba is approaching the North at a moment of global turbulence shaped by trade wars, geopolitical instability, Arctic sovereignty pressures, climate change, wildfires, and drought. In that context, he argued that climate security, economic security, and national security are now inseparable, and that governments need more thoughtful, resilient responses grounded in Indigenous wisdom. He framed the government's larger vision as "one Manitoba" and, increasingly, "one Canada," suggesting that current pressures have created both a stronger sense of unity and a shared national purpose. Churchill, in that framing, is not only strategically important but also symbolically and economically central to Manitoba's future.

He then focused on "Churchill Plus" as a major opportunity, but stressed that it must be pursued in balance with environmental protection and with the North rather than

imposed on it. He highlighted optimism in Churchill around infrastructure, defence, trade diversification, and an all-weather road, while also acknowledging concerns about housing, health care, emergency services, and everyday community capacity. The minister emphasized that the province wants to protect key ecosystems through initiatives such as the National Marine Conservation Area and the Seal River watershed process, while also advancing Indigenous-led governance through the Manitoba Crown Indigenous Corporation. His core message was that Manitoba wants to move from talking about the promise of the North to making real progress there, with Indigenous nations as full partners from the outset.

Dr. B. Mario Pinto, Vice President (Research and International) University of Manitoba

Dr Mario argued that any expansion of the Port of Churchill must be pursued through a careful balance between economic opportunity, Indigenous partnership, and environmental protection. He framed climate change as both the reason this opportunity exists and the central risk that must be managed, noting that Arctic warming is opening longer shipping seasons and making Churchill more geopolitically significant for access to Asia, Europe, and the Americas. At the same time, he emphasized that this cannot be treated simply as a trade or defence project: it must be rooted in human security for northern communities, including better communications, health care, transportation, food and water security, and cultural conservation. Throughout, he stressed that this work has been co-developed with Indigenous partners, especially through the Arctic Gateway Group, and that Indigenous communities are not passive stakeholders but the primary drivers of the agenda.

He then described the research and infrastructure work already underway to make this possible in a responsible way. This includes marine monitoring through the Churchill Marine Observatory, studies of ship noise and its effects on beluga populations, research on caribou migration, digital modelling for new rail designs as permafrost melts, mapping critical minerals, building communications systems for safety on changing sea ice, and developing a more robust health-care model for northern communities. He also located Churchill within a much wider Arctic transformation, linking it to Greenland, Nunavut, the Northwest Passage, new northern roads, military and search-and-rescue planning, and growing international interest in Arctic shipping and sovereignty. His overall message was that the North is entering a period of major change, and that Canada must move forward with strong science, deep Indigenous co-development, and long-term planning if it hopes to expand Churchill without damaging the ecosystems, communities, and cultural life that make the region so significant.

Professor Dr Ranjan Dutta, Canada Research Chair (Tier II) in Community Disaster Research, Mount Royal University - keynote

Dr Ranjan argued that Arctic climate insecurity must be understood through community-led, land-based science, not through outside technical solutions alone. Drawing on several years of work in Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk with Indigenous, Black, and other

racialized communities, he described how rapid warming is already disrupting everyday life: prolonged high temperatures, shifting caribou patterns, expanding beaver activity and damming, more bugs, health pressures, and worsening food insecurity. He stressed that these changes are also damaging housing and infrastructure built on unstable ground, while creating rising mental stress for youth. His core point was that these problems are interconnected and cannot be addressed properly unless local communities are directly involved in defining both the problem and the solution.

He then made a stronger conceptual argument: Indigenous land-based knowledge should be treated as science and placed at the center of climate action, with western science serving as a tool rather than the organizing framework. He criticized “one model for everyone” approaches and said that Indigenous, Black, immigrant, and other racialized communities are still too often excluded from decision-making, even though they have lived in the region for decades. Using examples such as language camps, elder-led land walks, community mapping, and university sessions led by elders and knowledge keepers, he showed how co-creation should work in practice. His conclusion was that Arctic security must be relational and responsibility-based: protecting the North requires protecting the land, respecting community self-determination, and building solutions from local knowledge outward.

Adjunct Professor Marisol Maddox, Senior Arctic Fellow Dartmouth / Dickey Center, USA

The speaker began by emphasizing that, at the operational military level, Canada–US cooperation remains strong and deeply practical, especially through NORAD, which she described as the world’s only binational military command. She noted that there is broad bipartisan recognition in the US that the Arctic can no longer be ignored, with the US Coast Guard serving as the main American surface presence in the Arctic and the US Air Force holding the largest Arctic investment footprint. At the same time, she stressed that the broader American public has only limited awareness of Canada’s role in continental defence, and that Arctic and continental security cooperation is often underappreciated because successful deterrence makes threats seem invisible.

She then turned to the second Trump administration’s approach to the Arctic, describing it as far more prominent but also far more unstable than before. According to her, the administration has reframed the Arctic primarily through a homeland security and western hemisphere dominance lens, tied to ideas such as the Trump corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, rather than through a coherent long-term Arctic strategy. She pointed to Trump’s early rhetoric about Greenland and Canada, the use of tariffs and economic pressure as coercive tools, the dismantling of the Pentagon’s Arctic and Global Resilience Office, and the lack of a clear Arctic policy champion inside the US government. In her reading, this has created a chaotic environment in which agencies are often reacting to presidential statements or social media posts rather than following a clearly articulated strategy.

Her core conclusion was that this environment makes strength, unity, and capacity-building essential for Canada, Greenland, and other Arctic partners. She argued that the current US administration does not respect hesitation or weakness, and that other Arctic states therefore need to hold a firm line on issues such as Indigenous rights, free, prior and informed consent, and climate change, even when those are not priorities in Washington. In the discussion period, she acknowledged the deep damage done to trust in the United States as an ally, but she also maintained that the US remains an ally whose military and deterrence role still matters. Her overall message was that the alliance is under strain, but that careful cooperation, firm boundaries, and stronger coordination among Arctic partners are the only realistic way forward.

Norma Kassi, Former Chief, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, Indigenous Knowledge holder, Yukon University

Norma grounded her remarks in lived experience from Old Crow, Yukon, where she grew up on the land among lakes, birds, caribou, muskrats, and beavers, and where survival depended on intimate knowledge of the environment. She described this relationship not as abstract culture but as a deeply embodied way of life in which people speak to trees, animals, and the land itself. That is why environmental change is not, in her telling, a technical issue alone. It is a rupture in identity, continuity, and survival. She illustrated this through the draining of a major lake in the Old Crow Flats in 2007, which she described as an early visible sign of profound ecological disruption already underway in her homeland.

She then connected this environmental change to a longer history of Indigenous political resistance, especially around the protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Porcupine caribou herd. She recalled how Gwich'in leaders and elders gathered in Arctic Village after the Reagan administration moved to open the refuge for oil and gas development, and how the strategy that emerged was rooted not in outside environmental agendas but in Gwich'in law, language, and responsibility to the caribou. In her framing, current conversations about Arctic sovereignty and security cannot be separated from this history: for her people, defending the Arctic means defending food systems, water, land, and the cultural and spiritual relationships that have sustained them for generations.

Her central policy message was that Indigenous peoples must lead Arctic security through land guardianship, land-based education, and youth training. She pointed to the growth of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas and the land guardian movement across Canada, arguing that the North needs many more trained young Indigenous people with formal recognition, proper pay, and the authority to protect their homelands. She also criticized military and state actors for entering northern territory without proper collaboration, using an example from her community to show that outside institutions still too often fail to respect local knowledge. Her conclusion was clear: Arctic security cannot be imposed from outside. It has to be built with Indigenous peoples, on Indigenous lands, through Indigenous leadership and community-based training.

3. Policy Findings

The workshop generated twenty-five consolidated themes. They are organized below into seven clusters that reflect the natural architecture of the discussion. Each theme includes a brief analysis and a punch-line drawn from the workshop dialogue.

3.1 Climate, Environment, and Ecological Stewardship

Climate Change as a Total Systems Condition

Across the workshop, climate change was never treated as a separate environmental file sitting in its own folder. It showed up everywhere — in conversations about food, travel, emergency response, health, infrastructure, wildlife, and defence planning. Participants described climate disruption as something lived daily in northern and Indigenous communities, even when it remains abstract in national capitals and southern boardrooms.

The implication is clear: Arctic policy cannot afford to silo climate into an environmental portfolio. It is a cross-cutting condition that reshapes every other policy domain. A food security plan that ignores changing caribou migration is not a plan. A defence posture that ignores melting permafrost under its runways is not a posture. It is a wish.

“Climate change is a new type of war.”

Protecting Land, Animals, and Water as a Central Security Ethic

One of the most powerful through-lines in the discussion was not technical but moral. Participants returned again and again to the land, the animals, and the water as the proper reference point for security. This pushes Arctic debate away from a purely hardware-centred model and toward stewardship, care, restraint, and interdependence.

Security policy in the Arctic gains legitimacy when it is anchored in ecological protection and community stewardship. A military installation that contaminates the water table it was built to defend is not just ironic — it is self-defeating.

“Protect the land and the animals.”

Food Systems, Mobility, and Seasonal Knowledge Under Stress

The climate sessions added concrete, ground-level depth to the broader systems discussion. Changes in moose and caribou patterns, disease in animals, fog and travel risk, seasonal access disruption, harvesting failures, and the erosion of land-based learning are not peripheral livelihood concerns. They affect identity, health, intergenerational teaching, and what it means to remain on the land. When a young hunter

cannot learn the routes that her grandmother knew, something more than a grocery list is at stake.

“This is our food.”

Prevention Is Underbuilt; Response Keeps Arriving Too Late

Fire management, cultural burning, training, local preparedness, and early capacity-building were all described as neglected compared with the visible mobilization that comes after a crisis has already escalated. Canada spends heavily on reactive response — evacuations, military deployments, emergency shelters — while systematically under-investing in the upstream work that would make those responses less necessary. This pattern applies not only to wildfires but to climate adaptation, community readiness, and public health more broadly.

“Do the training before the emergency.”

3.2 Sovereignty, Self-Determination, and Lived Capacity

Sovereignty as Lived Capacity

The notes repeatedly showed that sovereignty is not only about jurisdiction, maps, borders, or patrols. It is also about whether communities can live well, exercise authority, maintain land-based relationships, preserve knowledge, and shape the terms of development around them. Sovereignty, in this framing, is less about symbolic possession and more about whether people on the ground have the tools, the voice, and the conditions to lead their own lives.

A credible Arctic sovereignty framework must include community viability, Indigenous self-determination, and the social conditions that make northern life sustainable. You cannot claim a region you have not invested in. You cannot assert sovereignty over a population you have not listened to.

“Sovereignty here means self-determination.”

Indigenous Knowledge as Operational Knowledge

The workshop strongly rejected the idea that Indigenous knowledge belongs only in ceremonial acknowledgment, cultural briefings, or side consultations. It was described instead as practical, operational knowledge for travel, ecological judgment, safe movement, wildlife stewardship, harvesting, crisis awareness, and long-term planning. The repeated point was not simply that Indigenous knowledge deserves respect — though it does — but that decisions made without it will be worse.

“Without Inuit knowledge, people cannot make informed decisions in the North.”

Infrastructure as the Material Foundation of Sovereignty

Runways, roads, ports, communications, housing, power, data networks, transport corridors, and municipal readiness — these are the material basis of sovereignty. Communities cannot be asked to carry national strategic burdens while basic systems remain fragile or non-existent. The workshop broadened the meaning of infrastructure by linking it to connectivity, health access, cultural continuity, and reliable daily life. A community without clean water is not sovereign in any meaningful sense, regardless of what the map says.

“Sovereignty depends on what actually works on the ground.”

3.3 Defence, Security, US-Canada Relationship, and the Threat Environment

Defence Priorities and Northern Priorities Overlap Only Partially

Participants argued that the defence of Canada and the defence of North America are inseparable and must continue to be pursued in cooperation with the United States, regardless of current political and economic tensions between Ottawa and Washington. Dr. Fergusson (moderator of defence panel) emphasized that Canada–US defence relations have historically operated “beneath the radar” and remain largely insulated from wider bilateral disputes, while both countries have now reawakened to the Arctic as a major defence priority. In that context, he pointed to a renewed and very large-scale wave of military investment in the Canadian North, including modernization of the North Warning System, forward operating locations, and newly announced Northern Operational Support Hubs, suggesting that this may represent the biggest defence-related investment in the Arctic in decades, with major implications for northern communities and for broader Canada–US cooperation.

However, during the workshop, a strong pattern across the materials is the gap between what the defence system is designed to do and what northern communities most urgently need. Defence institutions are mission-driven and focused on national objectives. Communities are dealing with housing, food, internet access, addiction, local transport, evacuation stress, and everyday safety. The workshop did not reject defence priorities, but it firmly resisted the idea that they automatically absorb or solve northern realities. A radar station does not fix a housing crisis.

“A national priority is not automatically a northern priority.”

The Arctic Threat Environment Is Broader Than War

The discussion clearly widened the threat picture beyond conventional military attack. It includes foreign influence, predatory investment, environmental degradation, information

pressure, and institutional fragility. At the same time, participants sharpened the point that there is still a real technical military problem: radar gaps, missile detection limits, aerospace vulnerability, and the need to modernize systems that still carry Cold War assumptions. Both truths must be held at the same time.

“The threat is wider than missiles, but the radar still has to work.”

The Boundary Between Defence, Security, and Civil Responsibility

Participants repeatedly challenged each other on definitions. Defence institutions argued that not every form of security belongs to them. Others insisted that contemporary Arctic threats make those boundaries harder to maintain. The discussion never fully resolved this tension — and perhaps it should not be resolved too neatly. But it clarified the need to distinguish defence, broader security, emergency response, and social policy without pretending they are unrelated.

“Defence does not do everything, and everything is not defence.”

Emergency Management as a Structural Policy Gap

The military has become a default responder to domestic crises across the North because other institutions are often weak, late, or absent. Yet participants made clear that this is not the military’s ideal role. Defence forces are effective at immediate objectives, but they are ill-suited to absorb every second-order and third-order emergency generated by climate, infrastructure breakdown, or social crisis. Canada needs stronger civilian and regional emergency institutions so that the military becomes a true last resort rather than a recurring substitute.

“The military should be the last resort.”

Canada Faces a Strategy-Delivery Gap

This may be the single most sobering finding. The workshop repeatedly distinguished between announcing plans and delivering them. Participants spoke about delayed preparation, weak implementation, poor coordination, and funding structures that stop at the departmental boundary rather than following real local consequences. The main policy challenge is not the absence of strategy. Canada has plenty of strategies. The challenge is the absence of credible delivery systems that match northern timelines and realities.

“We are already behind.”

Technical Modernization Remains Urgent

Even as the workshop broadened the definition of security, it did not dismiss the hard military dimension. Radar gaps, missile detection limits, aerospace vulnerabilities, and

aging Cold War-era systems all demand urgent attention. Modernization is not optional. But modernization done without community partnership and/or consultation, ecological consideration, and local benefit will repeat old mistakes in new uniforms.

3.4 Trust, Consultation, and the Politics of Process

Consultation Is No Longer Enough

This was one of the clearest and most forceful themes. Procedural consultation — the kind where communities are invited to comment on decisions that have already been shaped — is widely seen as too late, too thin, and too often reduced to a box-checking exercise. Participants repeatedly asked what consultation actually means, who defines it, and whether community voices enter the conversation before projects are designed. The dominant direction was unmistakable: toward shared agenda-setting, co-production, and involvement at the point where needs and impacts are first defined. Majority of the participants suggested to have a standardized definition of ‘consultation’ for all types of stakeholders.

“Consultation cannot be a box-ticking exercise.”

Rotational Presence Does Not Build Trust

Officers arrive, begin to learn the landscape, start building relationships, and then leave just as trust is emerging. The next rotation starts from zero. This creates fatigue inside communities and makes every new engagement feel like a reset button that nobody asked for. The workshop elevated the importance of continuity, permanent presence where appropriate, and stronger Inuit and northern representation inside the institutions that operate in the region.

“You cannot build trust on rotations.”

Trust, Communication, and Procedural Respect

Mistrust is created procedurally as much as politically. Communities notice unclear agendas, inaccessible meeting formats, inconsistent follow-up, symbolic consultation, and the failure to respect how knowledge is held and shared. The point is not cosmetic. Poor process directly weakens the legitimacy and eventual effectiveness of policy. Process quality should be treated as a substantive strategic concern because trust, legitimacy, and long-term cooperation depend on it.

“Process is more important than policy.”

3.5 Social Conditions, Equity, and Community Well-Being

Social Distress Is Inseparable from Security

Drug exposure among children and youth, mental health strain, incarceration, evacuation trauma, food insecurity, and social instability — these were treated not as background noise but as foundational realities that shape whether any sovereignty or defence initiative can be legitimate or sustainable. The message was not that security is irrelevant. The message was that security rests on unstable ground when social conditions are ignored. You cannot build a fortress on a crumbling foundation and call it strong.

“A strong country needs an empowered society.”

Resilience Must Not Become an Excuse for Neglect

The workshop recognized the deep resilience of Inuit and other Indigenous communities. But it also warned against how governments may hear that word. Communities do not want their resilience to be misread as proof that they can absorb endless pressure, delayed response, or reduced investment. Resilience is strength. It is not a permission slip for the state to step back.

“Do not turn our resilience into your excuse.”

Gendered and Uneven Vulnerability

Security and development are not socially neutral. Women, girls, and gender-diverse people may bear disproportionate risks when new infrastructure, outside labour, military activity, or poorly designed interventions enter small communities. This is one of the clearest reasons the workshop insisted on local knowledge, early planning, and community-defined safeguards. Gender and social vulnerability should be built into Arctic planning from the beginning, not appended later as a compliance exercise.

“Protect women and girls as part of protecting the North.”

Youth Training and Local Capacity-Building

There was strong support for building youth capability before crisis, especially among Indigenous and northern young people. Rangers, local trainees, guardians, culturally grounded civic preparation, and reserve-type pathways were all treated as ways to build resilience, dignity, and long-term capacity. The federal government’s announced plan to expand the supplemental reserve from 4,400 to 300,000 citizen soldiers represents a remarkable and time-sensitive opportunity. Workshop participants argued that this expansion must actively recruit Indigenous youth in the Arctic, creating real training dollars and career pathways while ensuring the pipeline does not flow disproportionately toward far-right extremist elements. The training itself should incorporate anti-racism and

anti-radicalization components. Critically, the discussion insisted that Indigenous youth with criminal records or histories of incarceration should not be automatically disqualified. Drawing on the powerful testimony shared during the workshop about incarcerated Indigenous men and women alike, participants framed the reserve expansion as an effective rehabilitation opportunity — one that restores self-worth, provides meaningful careers, and lasts a lifetime. The vision was clear: train young people to be warriors waging peace and guarding the lands, water, and air, grounded in Indigenous values of love, truth, honesty, wisdom, humility, and courage. Investing in young people is not charity. It is strategy.

“Train young people to guard the lands, water, and air: The Guardians of the Land.”

3.6 Investment, Legacy, and International Cooperation

Avoiding Colonial and Extractive Patterns

A recurring concern was that new defence, infrastructure, or resource investment can easily repeat older patterns of externally driven northern transformation. Communities worry about decisions being centralized while impacts are localized, about military presence echoing colonizing practices, and about critical minerals or corporate activity moving ahead without genuine accountability. Urgency should not become a new vocabulary for old domination.

“Security cannot become a new language for old extraction,”

Collective Prosperity and Local Sourcing

Prosperity in Indigenous contexts is often collective rather than narrowly individual. New projects should create local capability, local labour pathways, and local benefit instead of importing everything from outside. The same logic appeared in calls for multi-use facilities, community employment, and economic participation tied to dignity rather than tokenism. Investment models in the North should be judged partly by whether they build collective local capacity instead of simply extracting value or delivering temporary external jobs.

“Prosperity has to be collective.”

Legacy Infrastructure and Material Footprint

What military or state projects leave behind matters as much as the decision to build them. Equipment, materials, buildings, storage sites, and even old radar infrastructure can become burdens, landmarks, hazards, or opportunities depending on how communities are involved. Arctic planning should include take-back obligations, reuse

options, cleanup commitments, and community-led decisions about what stays, what goes, and what gets repurposed. The afterlife of infrastructure should never be somebody else's problem, especially in the north.

“Take everything back with you — unless the community decides otherwise.”

International Cooperation Must Be Pragmatic

The workshop showed concern about U.S. politics, Greenland, Russia, and broader geostrategic instability, but it also resisted panic. Participants distinguished between political rhetoric and military-to-military realities. They emphasized continued negotiation, circumpolar dialogue, Indigenous international engagement, and practical cooperation. Canada's Arctic strategy should preserve pragmatic cooperation channels even during geopolitical strain, especially where dialogue reduces misunderstanding and supports northern communities.

“The problem may be political rather than operational.”

3.7 Values, Governance, and the Way Forward

Values Must Organize Long-Horizon Planning

One of the deepest themes was temporal. Participants warned that the decisions being made now will shape the North for decades, perhaps for a century, while current planning remains too thin and too reactive. The strategic question is not only what Canada builds, but what values will organize that future. Speed without direction is just expensive confusion.

“Put values and realities over politics.”

The Strongest Model Is Relational and Co-Productive

Taken together, the workshop's findings point toward a relational model of Arctic governance. It values trust, co-production of knowledge, cultural respect, continuity, local voice, practical capability, ecological care, and institutional humility. Technical systems, infrastructure, and defence capabilities still matter, but they are repeatedly treated as insufficient on their own. The policy paper's central argument is this: Arctic governance is a relational project in which capability must be built with communities rather than delivered to them.

“The military, government, and Indigenous communities should be in the same boat.”

4. Consolidated Thematic Table

The table below summarizes all twenty-five themes, their descriptions, policy relevance, and the punch-line framing drawn from seminar dialogue.

Theme	Description	Policy Relevance	Punch Line
Climate change is a total systems condition	Cross-cutting condition reshaping food, travel, health, infrastructure, wildlife, and defence.	Integrate climate across all Arctic policy domains.	Climate change is a new type of war.
Sovereignty as lived capacity	Not just jurisdiction — about whether communities can live well, exercise authority, and shape development.	Include community viability and self-determination in sovereignty frameworks.	Sovereignty here means self-determination.
Defence and northern priorities overlap partially	Defence is mission-driven; communities need housing, food, connectivity, and safety.	Distinguish overlap from substitution.	A national priority is not automatically a northern priority.
Consultation must become co-design	Procedural consultation is too late, too thin, and too often a box-checking exercise.	Design around early partnership and shared problem definition.	Consultation cannot be a box-ticking exercise.
Rotational presence erodes trust	Short rotations create fatigue and reset relationships to zero.	Rethink recruitment, assignment, and retention for continuity.	You cannot build trust on rotations.
Indigenous knowledge is operational	Practical knowledge for travel, ecology, safety, harvesting, and planning.	Treat as core operational input, not cultural add-on.	Without Inuit knowledge, people cannot make informed decisions.
Ecological stewardship as security ethic	Land, animals, and water are the proper reference point for security.	Anchor security policy in ecological protection.	Protect the land and the animals.
Infrastructure as sovereignty foundation	Runways, housing, power, communications are the material basis of sovereignty.	Treat infrastructure policy as sovereignty policy.	Sovereignty depends on what actually works on the ground.
Strategy-delivery gap	Plans exist; credible execution does not.	Build delivery systems matching northern timelines.	We are already behind.
Broader threat environment	Includes foreign influence, environmental degradation, information pressure, and institutional fragility.	Hold two ideas: threats are wider than war, but modernization matters.	The threat is wider than missiles, but the radar still has to work.
Emergency management gap	Military is default responder because civilian institutions are weak.	Build stronger civilian and regional emergency capacity.	The military should be the last resort.

Prevention is underbuilt	Fire management, training, preparedness neglected compared to reactive response.	Shift resources upstream toward prevention.	Do the training before the emergency.
Food systems and seasonal knowledge under stress	Changing animal patterns, disease, travel risk, harvesting disruption.	Treat food security and land-based knowledge as strategic concerns.	This is our food.
Youth training is central	Rangers, guardians, reserve expansion to 300,000 as recruitment opportunity; anti-racism training; inclusive of those with criminal records; rehabilitation through service.	Invest in youth preparation as resilience and social transformation.	Train young people to guard the lands, water, and air: The Guardians of the Land.
Social distress shapes security	Addiction, mental health, food insecurity, trauma are foundational realities.	Connect sovereignty to healing, prevention, and well-being.	A strong country needs an empowered society.
Resilience is not an excuse	Communities' strength must not be misread as ability to absorb neglect.	Affirm resilience without substituting it for investment.	Do not turn our resilience into your excuse.
Colonial patterns risk repeating	New investment can echo older patterns of external domination.	Screen investments for colonial reproduction and community consent.	Security cannot become a new language for old extraction.
Gendered vulnerability matters	Women, girls, and gender-diverse people bear disproportionate risk.	Build gender analysis into planning from the start.	Protect women and girls as part of protecting the North.
Trust and procedural respect	Mistrust is created by poor process, unclear agendas, and inconsistent follow-up.	Treat process quality as a strategic variable.	Process is more important than policy.
Legacy infrastructure needs community decisions	What projects leave behind can be burden or opportunity.	Include take-back obligations and community-led repurposing.	Take everything back with you — unless the community decides otherwise.
Defence, security, and civil responsibility boundaries	Definitions remain unsettled; boundaries are blurring.	Define clearly what belongs under defence vs. security vs. shared responsibility.	Defence does not do everything, and everything is not defence.
Collective prosperity and local sourcing	Prosperity is collective; projects should create local capability.	Judge investments by whether they build local capacity.	Prosperity has to be collective.

International cooperation must be pragmatic	Concern about geopolitics, but also resistance to panic.	Preserve pragmatic channels even during strain.	The problem may be political rather than operational.
Values over urgency	Decisions now shape the North for decades; planning is too thin.	Anchor planning in explicit values, not reactive urgency.	Put values and realities over politics.
Relational and co-productive governance	Trust, co-production, cultural respect, local voice, ecological care.	Frame governance as relational, not purely technical.	The military, government, and Indigenous communities should be in the same boat.

5. Recommendations

Based on the consolidated findings of the ICASUS workshop, the following recommendations are offered to federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous decision-makers:

5.1 Governance and Partnership

- Establish co-design as the default mode for Arctic policy development. Consultation should begin at the problem-definition stage, not after plans are drawn.
- Create permanent, adequately resourced mechanisms for Indigenous authority in Arctic governance — not advisory panels, but decision-making seats.
- Develop assignment and retention models that prioritize continuity of personnel in northern postings, with meaningful incentives for longer-term service.
- Consider recruiting northern youth with additional incentives: this will reduce rotation cost and be feasible in a sustainable way.
- Include gender and social vulnerability analysis in all major Arctic policy initiatives from inception.

5.2 Defence and Security

- Proceed urgently with NORAD modernization and radar system upgrades while embedding community partnership and environmental safeguards into every project.
- Clearly define the boundaries between defence, broader security, emergency response, and social policy — and fund each accordingly.
- Invest in civilian and regional emergency management capacity so that the Canadian Armed Forces serve as a genuine last resort, not a recurring default.
- Leverage the supplemental reserve expansion to 300,000 as a recruitment and training opportunity for Indigenous youth in the Arctic, with built-in anti-racism and anti-radicalization training, inclusive eligibility that does not disqualify those with criminal records or incarceration histories, and career pathways grounded in rehabilitation, dignity, and Indigenous values.

5.3 Climate and Environment

- Treat climate change as a cross-cutting condition in all Arctic policy, not a separate environmental portfolio.

- Shift investment upstream toward prevention, preparedness, and locally grounded capability, particularly in fire management, cultural burning, and community readiness.
- Protect food systems, seasonal mobility, and the transmission of land-based knowledge as strategic policy concerns through engaging the Guardians of the land.
- Embed ecological stewardship obligations — including take-back, cleanup, and reuse commitments — in all northern infrastructure projects.

5.4 Infrastructure and Investment

- Treat northern infrastructure investment as sovereignty policy, resilience policy, and social policy simultaneously.
- Require that major investments demonstrate local benefit, local sourcing, and collective capacity-building rather than simply extracting value.
- Screen all major Arctic projects for colonial reproduction and extractive logic, with meaningful community consent processes.
- Design multi-use facilities that serve both defence objectives and community needs wherever possible.

5.5 International Engagement

- Preserve pragmatic military-to-military and circumpolar cooperation channels even during periods of geopolitical strain.
- Support Indigenous international engagement as a legitimate and valuable dimension of Canada's Arctic diplomacy.
- Distinguish between political rhetoric and operational reality in assessing Arctic threats, and plan accordingly.

6. Conclusion

The ICASUS workshop did not produce a neat, tidy set of answers. That was never the target either. What it produced was something more valuable: an honest, multi-voiced, multi-dimensional, and often uncomfortable conversation about what Arctic sovereignty, security, and resilience actually require when you stop talking about the North from a distance and start listening to the people who live there.

The twenty-five themes in this paper are not a checklist to be ticked off by the next federal budget cycle. They are an interconnected argument. Climate change is reshaping the Arctic faster than policy can respond. Sovereignty means nothing if the communities that embody it cannot live well. Defence matters, but it cannot substitute for social investment, ecological stewardship, or the slow, patient work of building trust. Consultation that arrives after the decisions are made is not consultation — it is theatre.

The strongest model to emerge from this workshop is **‘relational’**. It insists that Arctic governance must be built on trust, co-production, cultural respect, local authority, and institutional humility. It does not reject technology, infrastructure, or military capability. It simply refuses to accept that these are sufficient on their own.

Canada has a window. It is not a large window, and it is not staying open indefinitely. The participants in this workshop — Indigenous leaders, Elders, scholars, military officers, scientists, and government officials — came together because they believe that window still matters. The question now is whether the country will walk through it together or continue to stand on opposite sides of the glass.

The military, government, and Indigenous communities should be in the same boat. These were the workshop’s final words. It should be ours as well.

Name	Role / Title	Affiliation
Hon. Minister Mike Moyes	Special Guest, Minister of Environment and Climate Change	Province of Manitoba
Dr. B. Mario Pinto	Vice-President (Research and International)	University of Manitoba
Dr. Ranjan Datta	Keynote Speaker; Canada Research Chair (Tier II) in Community Disaster Research	Mount Royal University
Marisol Maddox	U.S. Arctic Strategy; Senior Arctic Fellow	Dartmouth / Dickey Center
Prof. James Fergusson	Session Lead on U.S. Arctic Strategy; Director, Centre for Defence and Security Studies	University of Manitoba
Prof. C. Emdad Haque	Session Lead on Climate Change in the Arctic; Professor, Natural Resources Institute	University of Manitoba
Prof. Ken Coates	Session Lead on Indigenous-Led Sovereignty; Professor Emeritus and Canada Research Chair	University of Saskatchewan
Dr. Alex Crawford	Climate Change in the Arctic; Assistant Professor, Environment and Geography	University of Manitoba
Norma Kassi	Indigenous-Led Sovereignty; Former Chief, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, Indigenous Knowledge holder	Yukon University
Prof. Niigaan Sinclair	Special guest; Professor of Indigenous Studies	University of Manitoba
Col. Chris Morrison	Visiting Defence Fellow	University of Manitoba / RCAF
Dr. Rob Huebert	Professor, Political Science; Senior Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute	University of Calgary
Shari Currie	Regional Director General, Prairie and Northern Region	Transport Canada
Elikem Tsamenyi	Director, Intergovernmental Affairs and International Relations	Province of Manitoba
Darren Swanson	Director and President	Novel Futures Corporation
Amanda Kilabuk	Director, MMIWG2S+ Urban Indigenous Action Group	Urban Indigenous Action Group, Ottawa
Natalija Vojno	Rotary Peace Fellow; Water Policy and Peacebuilding Expert	
Maxine Issiqut Angoo	Executive Director	Tunngasugit Inc. Winnipeg, MB