

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

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

Historically, the Arctic has been a space where relationship building and peaceful international cooperation have thrived. With the looming consequences of climate change threatening the Arctic region first and foremost, the Arctic Council offers the opportunity for meaningful collaboration on policy issues pertaining to climate change and security. Although not all members of the Arctic Council are like-minded to Canada, and the council's place within global governance architecture is small, the Arctic Council has the potential to serve as an avenue for Canada to strengthen alliances with nations that share Canadian policy priorities and strategies beyond the

Arctic. Ultimately, Canada's multilateral posture moving forward will need to support a sense of alignment between populist-vs-climate change sentiments and multilateral vulnerability preparedness. This paper will examine how a renewed commitment to engagement in the Arctic could be a viable avenue for Canada's multilateral agenda, and thus should be considered a key domestic and foreign policy priority.

The paper considers Canada's multilateralist posture and the key trends that have impacted and shaped multilateral priorities for Canada in recent years. It begins by examining linkages between populist-driven tensions within Canada and its traditional partner countries and the global climate change agenda (Serhan 2020). The paper then explains Canada's multilateral priorities, which include a significant focus on the Arctic region. Conclusions indicate that, based on the need for fora that allow the deepening of like-minded partnerships and the resetting of other relationships — at the same time as supporting domestic interests and US bilateral relations — a renewed commitment to the Arctic Council should serve as a defining feature of Canada's multilateral positioning moving forward.

Key Trends Shaping Multilateral Priorities

As right-wing populist movements have gained political traction in many of Canada's traditional partner countries,

discussion of these populist trends have often focused on immigration policies. With the urgency of the climate crisis being prioritized on the international agenda, greater attention is now being paid to the relationship between right-wing populism and climate skepticism.

While on the one hand there has been a global rise of “green parties,” climate-focused politicians and environmental advocacy groups, these actors must now contend with powerful populist figures, such as US President Donald Trump, who has openly denied the seriousness of the climate crisis (ibid.). Concerning narratives from other populists have branded climate change an “elitist hoax” that warrants no further attention (ibid.). A report exposing links between populism and climate skepticism suggests that most climate-forward global policies have been driven by the mandates of international organizations (Dibley 2019). To populists, a sense of collaborative unity toward a common goal is unappealing and even viewed by some as a threat to state sovereignty. An economic argument is also held up, since populist narratives often argue in favour of the economic benefits for those working in the extractive or industrial sectors (Gunster 2019). The perceived battle between the economy and the environment emerges clearly in populist-vs-climate narratives.

The COVID-19 global health pandemic has exposed gaps in Canada’s preparedness to address such crises (Fitz-Gerald and Segal 2020). It has also served as a reminder that the changing climate could bear responsibility for the next global crisis. This is further underscored by research that indicates the climate crisis could hit Canada’s north first and worst. Dedication to addressing the climate agenda is therefore seen as being beneficial to Canada’s global and domestic constituencies (Burn 2019).

The local nature of this significant global threat, and the need to address the climate agenda through robust and well-functioning multilateral partnerships, suggest that current levels of climate skepticism remain a concern for Canada. This is particularly the case when combatting climate change continues to be prioritized across government policy agendas. As these policy agendas can gain traction only with the support of partners, a call for shifts in our multilateral positioning is required. Global crises require multilateral engagement, preparedness and responses. As countries around the world come together to share information, best practices, resources and future

plans to reduce the risk of a repeat of the COVID-19 experience, Canada’s multilateral posture moving forward will need to reflect this cooperative spirit and apply lessons learned from these initiatives to strengthen future multilateral vulnerability preparedness.

Canada’s Multilateral Priorities Supporting Climate Change

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

Although these commitments demonstrate a desire for Canada to be a global leader in supporting the climate change agenda, political initiative to achieve this leadership through multilateral fora appears to be lacking. Canada’s efforts may bear more fruit if coordinated through a multilateral organization that prioritizes climate change and also prioritizes the Arctic, as the Arctic is a vulnerable global region and an important domestic concern for Canadians.

Among Canada’s Arctic priorities in the prime minister’s mandate letters are defending the nation’s Arctic sovereignty, monitoring the effects of climate change and safeguarding those living in the Arctic, who are often Indigenous communities (Trudeau 2019c). These Arctic priorities involve Canada leveraging its membership within the Arctic Council, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the United Nations in a way that provides Canada with greater influence on Arctic issues and further supports the rules-based order, especially when engaged in Northern affairs (ibid.). The Polar Continental Shelf Program and the Eureka Weather Station are important Arctic infrastructure that must be maintained in order to fulfill scientific and defence

goals; these goals can also be pursued through activity in the Arctic Council, as environmental science is a priority for the council, and defence is a critical issue to many of its members (Trudeau 2019d). Lastly, ongoing defence relations between Canada and the United States, especially those relating to monitoring, surveillance and interoperability, reinforce the importance of increased involvement with the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) to secure the continent and “demonstrate international leadership with respect to the navigation of Arctic waters” (Trudeau 2019e). Whereas NORAD’s scope as a bilateral organization is more narrowly focused, NATO and the United Nations are multilateral institutions with broader policy remit that, at the moment, do not pay significant attention to climate-related Arctic issues. The Arctic Council is the most appropriate forum for Canada to seek further multilateral support in tackling climate change issues, as it accommodates a more optimal multilateral platform, and a climate-Arctic policy focus. Additionally, this would serve to support one specific federal policy priority: that of increasing engagement with the Arctic Council (Trudeau 2019c).

While the Arctic Council provides Canada with an opportunity to be a more influential leader in the field of climate change, it does not include the full spectrum of states that have interests in the Arctic region. Asia-Pacific states such as China and Japan, both with observer status on the council, have trade interests in the Arctic. As Canada looks to pursue new trade agreements with these states, further engagement with them through the Arctic Council is logical (Trudeau 2019f). Since Canada enjoys a unique position as being the only G7 nation to have a trade agreement with every other G7 nation, expanding on and benefiting further from those agreements remain in its interests (*ibid.*).

Similarly, while the Arctic Council is a good starting point for Canada’s multilateral engagement on climate change issues, members of the council are not the only states interested in mitigating the effects of climate change. While campaigning in 2019 and 2020 for Canada’s bid for a seat on the UN Security Council, Trudeau and Minister of Foreign Affairs François-Philippe Champagne met with leaders from Africa and the Caribbean who expressed climate-based concerns that require collective attention (Cullen 2020). Also worthy of note are comments that highlight the balance that Canada must strike

on the Arctic Council between economic opportunity and environmental conservation, in particular amidst attractions for states to take advantage of the Arctic region and risk creating environmental degradation in their pursuit (Lackenbauer 2014). The council thus provides Canada with the political and institutional space for deeper multilateral engagement on issues concerning Canada’s social, environmental and economic interests in the Arctic.

Canada’s Arctic Multilateralist Experience to Date

Canada has played an important role on the Arctic Council, beginning with its advocacy for the council’s creation. With the support of Finland, Canada endorsed the expansion of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy into the Arctic Council and the inclusion of a wider array of Arctic issues (Charron 2012). This led to the Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council (known as the Ottawa Declaration), signed in Ottawa on September 19, 1996. The agreement included Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States (Arctic Council 1996).

Following the council’s formation, Canada continued its leadership position as the council’s rotating chair for two years and again from 2013 until 2015. During its second term, Canada emphasized the need for economic development primarily through resource extraction and shipping (Exner-Pirot 2019). This led to the creation of the Arctic Economic Council, which emphasizes responsible, sustainable and regulatory-based development (Arctic Economic Council 2020), and is one of Canada’s most significant contributions to the Arctic Council (Exner-Pirot 2016). Canada also led initiatives to mitigate the impacts of excessive carbon and methane in the Arctic by addressing oil pollution and supporting nature conservation initiatives (*ibid.*). Canada’s time as chair demonstrated effective multilateral skills, not only in introducing new initiatives to the council, but also in reinforcing previous mandates.

The future of the Arctic Council and Arctic cooperation will be at its greatest crossroads when Russia takes the chair from 2021 to 2023. This will come at a moment when there has been increasing worry about Russia’s military influence in the Arctic (NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2017), as well as its actions in the Middle East and Ukraine (Charron 2017). At the time of writing,

Russia is among the nations hardest-hit by COVID-19 (Thomson Reuters 2020), which, together with the economic damage incurred as a result of oil price wars with Saudi Arabia, has put the country under tremendous strain. Historically, Canada and Russia have had their disagreements, especially over Canada's inclusion of the Ukraine issue during its last term as chair of the Arctic Council (Exner-Pirot 2019). But moving forward on some of these difficult bilateral relationships, which some analysts have referred to as requiring the adoption of a policy of "pragmatic realism" (Fitz-Gerald and Segal 2020), may be best pursued within a less controversial multilateral context, a context that perfectly describes the Arctic Council. Russia's leadership could provide Ottawa with an opportunity to increase its role in Arctic affairs by "resetting" its relationship with the Kremlin and perhaps assisting Canada in increasing its standing in the council. This would give Canada a strategic and important role in Arctic affairs and provide a path toward a more productive relationship with the existing chair. Engaging Russia in a multilateral manner may also help diversify its Arctic interests beyond a military focus.

NATO's expanded role would help Canada in meeting its multilateral security obligations, for which it has received criticism from the United States (Charron 2019). A more tangible and bolstered commitment to NATO could open pathways for greater multilateral cooperation with Norway,¹ which has also been vocal about an increased role for NATO in the Arctic (Huebert 2019). As most Arctic states are also NATO members, the overlapping membership would enable greater NATO and Arctic cooperation, although any NATO-led activities must be careful not to provoke a Russian response and should instead focus on deterrence (ibid.). Russia should not be made an enemy in these actions, as it has also encouraged greater collective cooperation in the region (Antonov 2019). NATO's increased role would act as a deterrent for future Russian military actions within the Arctic, as the Kremlin will need to focus on its internal issues and is unlikely to engage in a major multilateral conflict. This opens up a platform for multilateral negotiations as an alternative to dealing with Arctic issues. In this context, Canada's NATO operations could be broadened toward greater cooperation and deterrence across the Arctic in

order to respond to emerging global trends and the very collective security interests that NATO, under Article V of its governing North Atlantic Treaty,² is meant to protect.

Conclusion

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

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

The COVID-19 crisis has set the precedent for worldwide collaboration, sharing of best practices and resources, and collective research; the onus is now on multilateral alliances to apply the lessons learned to climate change. Canada's multilateral posture moving forward must balance populist pressures to revert inward with the need for multilateral cooperation on global issues such as climate change. An Arctic agenda provides Canada with the opportunity to be a global leader in climate change policy, sustain existing constructive partnerships, and form new partnerships.

1 Like Canada, Norway has been a strong advocate of both international peacekeeping and the human security agenda.

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

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