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Canada's Arctic Security Strategy in an Era of Climate Change and Geopolitical Tension

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Ilana Walker

Dedication

For my parents, whose courage, resilience, and love have inspired me more than words can express.

For my godfather, Peter Zelinski, whose unwavering belief in me, generosity, and support made this journey possible.

For the friends who walked beside me through this extraordinary chapter of life. We made it to the other side my friends, together, and I am forever grateful.

And for Elsie, my constant companion, who reminded me every day that even the longest journey is taken one walk at a time.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Canada is adapting its Arctic security strategy in response to climate change, increasing international competition, and regional militarization, and how Indigenous rights and governance are incorporated into this evolving framework. The study asks: How is Canada adapting its Arctic security strategy under changing environmental and geopolitical conditions, and how are Indigenous governance and rights framed within this process?

The research employs a qualitative single-case study design focused on Canada. It draws on qualitative document analysis of key Canadian defence, foreign policy, and Arctic governance documents, parliamentary materials, and selected Indigenous policy sources. The analysis is guided by an integrated theoretical framework combining security strategy, structural realism, balance of threat theory, and securitization theory. This framework is used to examine how environmental and geopolitical developments are interpreted as security concerns and how these interpretations shape strategic adaptation.

The findings demonstrate that Canadian Arctic security strategy has evolved from a relatively low-urgency, cooperation-focused approach toward a more active, security-driven, and operationally focused strategy. Climate change is framed as a threat multiplier that reshapes the Arctic security environment by increasing accessibility, strategic relevance, and pressure on northern infrastructure and governance systems. At the same time, Russia is constructed as an immediate military threat, while China is framed as a longer-term strategic and economic challenger, contributing to growing concerns regarding sovereignty, deterrence, and continental defence. Indigenous governance is increasingly incorporated into Arctic policy through partnership frameworks and co-development processes, although tensions remain between Indigenous self-determination and state security priorities.

A central finding of the thesis is that Canadian Arctic security strategy is not contained within a single dedicated strategy document. Rather, it emerges through a distributed network of defence, foreign policy, and Arctic governance frameworks that collectively define Canada's approach to Arctic security. The study argues that strategic adaptation occurs through the interaction of structural change and securitization, as environmental and geopolitical developments are linked to concerns about sovereignty, governance, and national security and translated into coordinated policy responses. In doing so, the thesis contributes to Arctic security scholarship by bridging the gap between security discourse and state strategy while integrating climate change, geopolitical competition, and Indigenous governance within a single analytical framework.

Keywords: Arctic Security; Security Strategy; Canada; Climate Change; Securitization; Indigenous Governance; Arctic Sovereignty; Geopolitical Competition.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht, wie Kanada seine arktische Sicherheitsstrategie als Reaktion auf den Klimawandel, den zunehmenden internationalen Wettbewerb und die regionale Militarisierung anpasst und wie indigene Rechte sowie indigene Governance in diesen sich wandelnden Rahmen eingebunden werden. Die Studie geht der Frage nach: Wie passt Kanada seine arktische Sicherheitsstrategie an veränderte ökologische und geopolitische Bedingungen an, und wie werden indigene Governance-Strukturen und Rechte in diesem Prozess dargestellt und berücksichtigt?

Die Untersuchung basiert auf einem qualitativen Einzelfallstudiendesign mit Fokus auf Kanada. Sie stützt sich auf eine qualitative Dokumentenanalyse zentraler kanadischer Verteidigungs-, Außenpolitik- und Arktis-Governance-Dokumente, parlamentarischer Materialien sowie ausgewählter indigener Politikdokumente. Die Analyse wird durch einen integrierten theoretischen Rahmen geleitet, der Sicherheitsstrategie, Strukturellen Realismus, die Balance-of-Threat-Theorie sowie die Versicherunglichungstheorie miteinander verbindet. Dieser Rahmen dient dazu zu untersuchen, wie ökologische und geopolitische Entwicklungen als Sicherheitsfragen interpretiert werden und wie diese Interpretationen strategische Anpassungsprozesse beeinflussen.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass sich die kanadische arktische Sicherheitsstrategie von einem vergleichsweise wenig dringlichen, kooperationsorientierten Ansatz hin zu einer aktiveren, sicherheitsorientierten und operativ ausgerichteten Strategie entwickelt hat. Der Klimawandel wird dabei als Bedrohungsverstärker („threat multiplier“) dargestellt, der das arktische Sicherheitsumfeld durch erhöhte Zugänglichkeit, wachsende strategische Bedeutung sowie steigenden Druck auf die Infrastruktur und Governance-Systeme des Nordens verändert. Gleichzeitig wird Russland als unmittelbare militärische Bedrohung konstruiert, während China als langfristiger strategischer und wirtschaftlicher Herausforderer dargestellt wird, was zu zunehmenden Bedenken hinsichtlich Souveränität, Abschreckung und kontinentaler Verteidigung beiträgt. Indigene Governance wird zunehmend durch Partnerschaftsmodelle

und gemeinsame Entwicklungsprozesse in die kanadische Arktispolitik integriert, wobei jedoch weiterhin Spannungen zwischen indigener Selbstbestimmung und staatlichen Sicherheitsprioritäten bestehen.

Eine zentrale Erkenntnis dieser Arbeit besteht darin, dass Kanadas arktische Sicherheitsstrategie nicht in einem einzelnen, eigenständigen Strategiedokument verankert ist. Vielmehr entsteht sie durch ein verteiltes Netzwerk von Verteidigungs-, Außenpolitik- und Governance-Rahmenwerken, die gemeinsam Kanadas Ansatz zur arktischen Sicherheit prägen. Die Arbeit argumentiert, dass strategische Anpassung durch das Zusammenspiel von strukturellem Wandel und Versicherheitlichung erfolgt, indem ökologische und geopolitische Entwicklungen mit Fragen der Souveränität, Governance und nationalen Sicherheit verknüpft und in koordinierte politische Reaktionen übersetzt werden. Dadurch leistet die Arbeit einen Beitrag zur Forschung über arktische Sicherheit, indem sie die Lücke zwischen Sicherheitsdiskurs und staatlicher Strategie schließt und gleichzeitig Klimawandel, geopolitischen Wettbewerb und indigene Governance in einem gemeinsamen analytischen Rahmen integriert.

Schlüsselwörter: Arktische Sicherheit; Sicherheitsstrategie; Kanada; Klimawandel; Versicherheitlichung; Indigene Governance; Arktische Souveränität; Geopolitischer Wettbewerb.

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1. Introduction

As the ice in the Arctic recedes due to climate change, previously inaccessible sea routes and natural resources are becoming the subject of growing geopolitical competition (Arctic Council, 2009; Jacobsen, 2013). Canada has the world's largest Arctic coastline and it is facing growing pressure to assert its sovereignty while maintaining environmental protection and Indigenous rights (Natural Resources Canada, 2024). Simultaneously, the region is seeing an increase in military activity from Russia and greater interest from actors such as China in the Arctic's expanding trade routes (Dodds, 2010; Jacobsen, 2013). China has identified itself as a "near Arctic state", increasing its visibility in Arctic debates (The People's Republic of China, n.d.). The evolving landscape presents both security challenges and opportunities for Canadian security policy and strategy.

Scientific research confirms that the Arctic is warming at a significantly faster rate than the global average, resulting in declining sea ice, changing ecosystems and increased navigability of northern waters (Arctic Council, 2009). The Canadian Arctic Archipelago, including the Northwest Passage (NWP), is becoming more accessible to commercial shipping and strategic transit (Arctic Council, 2009). This shift alters the physical and political geography of the region. What was once largely insulated by ice is now increasingly integrated into global trade routes and strategic calculations.

For Canada, these developments create a complex policy environment. Canada must balance sovereignty and national security concerns with commitments to environmental stewardship and Indigenous rights and governance. Indigenous communities are not peripheral actors in this context, but are central stakeholders whose land, waters and livelihoods are directly affected by both climate change and security initiatives (Government of Canada, 2019). These dynamics raise important questions about how Canada balances

cooperation, deterrence and partnership in a region that is becoming both more accessible and more strategically contested.

Canada is a particularly significant case through which to study Arctic security strategy because developments in the region affect not only its territorial sovereignty, but also its broader defence posture, alliance commitments and domestic governance responsibilities. The Canadian Arctic sits at the intersection of national security, environmental change and Indigenous political rights in a way that few other regions do. As a result, Canadian responses to Arctic transformation offer insight into how states adapt strategy when external pressures, internal governance obligations and contested geopolitical narratives converge. The case therefore has significance beyond Canada itself, as it helps illuminate broader questions about how security strategies evolve under conditions of environmental and geopolitical change.

At the same time, the regional environment is also becoming increasingly competitive. Growing Russian military activity and China's increasing political and economic engagement have contributed to a shift in how the Arctic is understood within international security debates (Dodds, 2010; Jacobsen, 2013). What was once often described as a peripheral and relatively cooperative space is increasingly being framed as a site of strategic rivalry, access, and control (Jacobsen, 2013).

Despite these changes, Canada's Arctic posture has historically emphasized cooperation, stability and low tension rather than overt confrontation. Therefore, the puzzle is not simply that the Arctic is changing, but how Canada is adapting its security strategy in response to these changing environmental and geopolitical conditions. This raises a broader question about how a state adjusts strategy when a region long associated with cooperation becomes increasingly shaped by competition, militarization and contested governance.

This thesis asks: How is Canada adapting its Arctic security strategy in response to climate change, increasing international competition, regional militarization, and how are Indigenous rights and governance framed within this process?

To answer this question, this research examines three sub questions. First, how is climate change framed as a security issue in Canadian Arctic policy and political discourse? Second, how are foreign actors such as Russia and China represented within Canadian security narratives, and how do these influences change policy responses? Third, how are Indigenous rights and governance incorporated into Canadian Arctic security strategy, and where do tensions between sovereignty, security and self-determination emerge?

By analyzing Canadian policy documents, political discourse and broader geopolitical developments through the lens of securitization theory, the study seeks to understand how environmental change and foreign presence are constructed as security concerns and how these constructions shape strategic decision-making. In doing so, the thesis aims to clarify Canada's evolving role in the Arctic and contribute to ongoing debates about sovereignty, security and governance in a rapidly transforming region.

The relevance of this thesis is both academic and political. Academically, the project speaks to wider debates in international relations and security studies concerning how states adapt strategy under changing environmental and geopolitical conditions. The Arctic provides a particularly important setting for this question because it brings together climate transformation, renewed strategic competition and contested governance within a single regional space (Jacobsen, 2013; Dodds, 2010). Politically, the Canadian case is significant because it illustrates how security policy must be formulated in a context where sovereignty, alliance commitments, environmental responsibility and Indigenous rights are all simultaneously at stake (Government of Canada, 2017, 2019).

This thesis contributes to the existing literature in two main ways. First, it connects environmental change, geopolitical competition and Indigenous governance within one analytical framework, rather than treating them as separate policy fields. Second, it addresses a gap in Arctic security scholarship between identifying security narratives and explaining how those narratives become reflected in concrete state strategy (Jacobsen, 2013; Padrtova, 2019). In this sense, the thesis moves beyond discourse alone and examines how securitized framings shape policy priorities and strategic adaptation in the Canadian Arctic (Buzan et al., 1998; Padrtova, 2019).

This thesis focuses on Canada as a single case study. The analysis is centered on Canadian official policy and political discourse, rather than on a full assessment of policy implementation on the ground.

In empirical terms, the study concentrates on key Canadian defence and foreign policy documents related to the Arctic, alongside parliamentary debates, official communications and institutional statements relevant to Arctic security. It also situates Canadian policy within the wider regional context, including the evolving role of actors such as Russia and China and the relevance of North American Treaty Organization (NATO) and North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) commitments. However, the thesis does not attempt to provide a comprehensive comparative study of all Arctic states, nor does it seek to evaluate the full operational effectiveness of Canadian Arctic policy. Its primary concern is with strategic framing, policy articulation and the relationship between security narratives and strategic adaptation.

This thesis focuses on the contemporary period from 2017 to the present, when Arctic transformation, renewed geopolitical tension and evolving Canadian security strategy become especially visible in official policy documents and political discourse. The timeframe begins with the release of *Strong, Secure, Engaged* and later Arctic and Northern policy developments that reshaped Canada's approach to Arctic security. The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical

framework, focusing on security strategy, structural change and securitization theory. Chapter 3 reviews the literature on Arctic security, securitization and Indigenous governance. Chapter 4 explains the research design and methodology. Chapter 5 outlines the changing Arctic security environment. Chapter 6 provides the main analysis of Canada's evolving Arctic security strategy. Chapter 7 concludes by summarizing the findings, identifying the thesis contributions and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Arctic security as cooperation or competition

The concept of the security environment refers to the broader structural and geopolitical conditions within which states interpret risks and formulate strategy. It encompasses material factors such as geography, access and capability distribution, as well as the evolving patterns of cooperation and competition that shape how the Arctic is understood as a security space. The literature on Arctic security shows that this understanding has changed over time. The development of Arctic security discourse over time shows that the region has not always been framed as a space of competition or militarization. This is also reflected in scholarship on Arctic governance, which emphasizes that the region's political development in the post-Cold War period was shaped by forms of cross-border cooperation and institutional collaboration rather than by military rivalry alone (Wilson Rowe, 2018).

In the years following the Cold War, the Arctic was often described as a zone of cooperation, environmental protection and scientific collaboration (Jacobsen, 2013). This period emphasized shared governance and confidence in institutions such as the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council's own

institutional description reinforces this point, presenting the Council as the leading intergovernmental forum for cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic states, with the involvement of Arctic Indigenous Peoples and other Arctic inhabitants, especially on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection (Arctic Council, 2009). Security was therefore not primarily articulated in military terms, but linked to narratives of environmental stewardship and regional partnership. Wilson Rowe similarly shows that the post-Cold War Arctic governance developed through cooperative regional practices that were certainly contested, but still largely framed through coordination and shared management rather than confrontation (Wilson Rowe, 2018). This cooperative framing is an important starting point in the literature because it shows that the Arctic was not always understood primarily through rivalry or confrontation.

Over time, the tone shifted as climate change accelerated and reports highlighted the possibility of ice-free summers and increasingly accessible shipping routes. The Arctic began to be framed less as a cooperative frontier and more as a strategic arena. Discussions increasingly emphasized sovereignty, control over sea routes and access to energy and mineral resources. With Russia's military actions and growing global power competition, the narrative shifted further toward security concerns and potential conflict. This shift from cooperation to competition is a key pattern seen in the literature (Jacobsen, 2013). Heininen and colleagues strengthen this argument by showing that Arctic policies and strategies increasingly connect environmental change to questions of governance, security and cooperation and the human dimension, rather than treating climate change as only a physical or ecological transformation (Heininen et al., 2020). In this case, increased accessibility altered not only the physical landscape of the Arctic, but also the political and strategic meaning attached to the region.

Dodds (2010) shows how legal and scientific practices connected to the law of the sea, including continental shelf claims, contributed to making sovereignty and jurisdiction central for Arctic geopolitics. Highly visible events also reinforced this reframing, including Russia's 2007 seabed flag planting, which functioned as a symbolic performance of sovereignty and intensified media narratives of rivalry (Dodds, 2010, p.63). While such acts had limited direct legal significance, they helped construct the Arctic as a strategic arena tied to access, territory and resources, rather than only cooperation (Dodds, 2010, pp. 64-66). More recent scholarship has pushed this argument further by emphasizing the growing role of military dynamics and regional security interests in contemporary Arctic debate. For example, Østhagen argues that discussions of the Arctic as a security region increasingly rest on the interaction between climate-driven economic and maritime change on one hand, and Russia's military build-up and regional influence on the other (Østhagen, 2021). This is useful because it shows that the Arctic's competitive turn is not explained by militarization alone, but by the combination of environmental transformation and renewed geopolitical attention.

Taken together, this literature is valuable because it places current Arctic security debates within a longer trajectory of changing environmental and geopolitical conditions. At the same time, much of this work remains focused on broad regional patterns and does not consistently examine how specific states, such as Canada, translate these shifting narratives into concrete strategic adaptations. This provides an important foundation for the present thesis, which builds on the literature's account of shifting Arctic discourse while looking for how these broader transformations are reflected in Canadian Arctic security strategy.

2.2 Securitization and Arctic discourse

A significant part of Arctic security scholarship draws on securitization theory to explain how issues become defined as matters of security rather than remaining within ordinary political debate. Developed by Ole Wæver and later formalized by the Copenhagen School, securitization theory argues that security is not an objective condition but a discursive process (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). An issue becomes a security concern when it is presented by a securitizing actor as an existential threat to a valued referent object, such as the state, sovereignty, territorial integrity or a particular community (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Through this process, political actors frame certain developments as requiring urgent and potentially exceptional measures. Successful securitization depends not only on the speech act itself, but on audience acceptance, which legitimizes the proposed response (Balzacq, 2005; Buzan et al., 1998). This theoretical approach has been particularly attractive to Arctic scholars because the region presents many issues that are not inherently or automatically “security” questions by themselves. Instead, questions of access, sovereignty, foreign presence, shipping, climate change and governance acquire security meaning through the ways in which they are narrated, interpreted and politically taken (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995).

Within Arctic scholarship, this approach has shifted attention away from treating security as purely a question of military capabilities or resource competition (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Instead, researchers examine how Arctic security is constructed through discourse, representation and recurring narratives (Padrtova, 2019). In this sense, the literature suggests that Arctic security is not simply discovered in material developments, but produced through political and discursive practices that define which issues count as threats and which do not (Padrtova, 2019; Wæver, 1995). This is an important move because it changes the analytical focus from asking only what is happening in the Arctic to also asking how the Arctic is being spoken about, by whom, and with what political effects. In this literature, security is not treated as a neutral label attached to an already obvious problem. Rather, it is understood as the outcome of framing processes that elevate some developments into matters of urgency while leaving others within the sphere of routine politics (Buzan et al., 1998; Padrtova, 2019). This makes securitization

theory especially useful for Arctic studies, where questions of sovereignty, access, environmental change and militarization are often shaped as much by narrative and interpretation as by material developments themselves (Padrtova, 2019).

Padrtova's analysis of media portrayals of Arctic security demonstrates how different issues become recognized as security concerns through patterns of representation in public-facing outlets (Padrtova, 2019). Her work is important because it shows that security is constructed not only through official strategy documents, but also through broader discursive environments in which recurring themes and frames shape public understanding of the region (Padrtova, 2019). Discourse-focused research therefore provides useful tools for analyzing how language, representation and recurring narratives shape what is recognized as a matter of Arctic security. In this sense, Arctic security debates are not only about geography or material capabilities, but also about how risks are interpreted and made meaningful by political actors and audiences (Padrtova, 2019). Padrtova's contribution is especially valuable because it demonstrates that the Arctic security field is structured through repetition. Certain themes, such as sovereignty, competition, foreign presence and strategic vulnerability, gain force not only because they reflect external developments, but because they are repeated across discursive settings and therefore come to appear natural, urgent or self-evident (Padrtova, 2019). This helps explain why some issues become central to Arctic security debate while others remain marginal or secondary (Padrtova, 2019).

This literature also points to important patterns in what kinds of issues are most frequently securitized. Narrative analyses suggests that Arctic security debates often prioritize state-centred concerns such as sovereignty, strategic competition and militarization, while giving comparatively less attention to human security and governance issues (Padrtova, 2019). This is reinforced by the broader historical literature on Arctic discourse, which shows a movement from post-Cold War cooperation and environmental stewardship toward increasing emphasis on rivalry, access and control (Jacobsen, 2013). Altogether, these studies suggest that the dominant discourse of Arctic security has increasingly privileged strategic and

territorial concerns over governance-oriented or community-based understandings of security (Jacobsen, 2013; Padrtova, 2019). Jacobsen is especially useful here because he shows that this shift was not abrupt, but developed over time through changing interpretations of the region. The Arctic was first widely imagined as a cooperative political space, but later became associated more strongly with sovereignty claims, resource politics and geopolitical attention (Jacobsen, 2013). When read together, Jacobsen and Padrtova suggest that Arctic security discourse changes historically, but also that once new narratives become dominant, they help shape what later counts as a legitimate security concern (Jacobsen, 2013; Padrtova, 2019).

At the same time, existing scholarship also has limitations. While securitization and discourse-based approaches are effective at identifying how Arctic security is framed, they do not consistently trace how these framings translate into concrete policy adaptation (Padrtova, 2019). Existing research demonstrates that issues such as climate change, shipping access and foreign military presence become security concerns only when framed as existential threats to sovereignty or national interest (Buzan et al., 1998; Padrtova, 2019). However, fewer studies connect these processes of securitization to the evolution of state security strategy over time, leaving a gap between identifying security narratives and explaining how they become embedded in official documents, defence planning and long-term strategic implementation (Jacobsen, 2013; Padrtova, 2019). In other words, the literature is strong in showing how Arctic threats are narrated, but less consistent in showing how these narratives are institutionalized. This matters because discourse does not remain only at the level of representation. When repeated and legitimized, security narratives can shape priorities, justify new forms of state presence and influence the kinds of policies that become thinkable or politically acceptable (Balzacq, 2005; Buzan et al., 1998). It is this gap between discourse and strategy that the present thesis seeks to address.

2.3 Climate change as a security issue

Climate change has become one of the most important themes in contemporary Arctic scholarship. While earlier discussions often treated climate change primarily as an environmental issue, more recent literature increasingly examines its security implications. Rather than viewing climate change as a direct military threat, many scholars describe it as a threat multiplier that intensifies existing political, economic and strategic challenges (Heininen et al., 2020). This perspective is particularly relevant in the Arctic, where environmental transformation has direct consequences for accessibility, governance and geopolitical competition.

Scientific assessments consistently show that the Arctic is warming significantly faster than the global average, resulting in declining sea ice, changing ecosystems and increased navigability of northern waters (Arctic Council, 2009). These developments have important political consequences because they increase access to maritime routes, natural resources and previously inaccessible regions. As accessibility grows, so does the potential for commercial activity, foreign presence and strategic competition (Arctic Council, 2009). Climate change therefore affects not only the physical environment, but also the strategic significance of the Arctic itself.

A growing body of scholarship argues that environmental transformation is fundamentally reshaping Arctic security dynamics. Heininen and colleagues contend that climate change should not be understood solely as an ecological process, but also as a development that affects governance structures, economic opportunities and security concerns simultaneously (Heininen et al., 2020). Increased accessibility creates new opportunities for shipping, tourism and resource extraction while also generating challenges related to infrastructure, emergency response and environmental protection (Heininen et al., 2020). In this sense, climate change changes both the physical characteristics of the Arctic and the political meaning attached to the region.

Canadian Arctic scholarship has similarly emphasized the relationship between climate change and sovereignty. Heubert argues that declining sea ice and increased navigability of the Northwest Passage create new challenges for Canadian sovereignty and security because greater accessibility increases foreign interest and activity in Arctic waters (Huebert, 2011). From this perspective, climate change does not merely alter environmental conditions. It changes the strategic environment within which Canada must assert sovereignty, monitor activity and maintain control over its northern territories (Huebert, 2011).

This literature is particularly important because it links environmental transformation to strategic adaptation. Climate change does not automatically create security threats. Rather, changing conditions generate new pressures and opportunities that states must interpret and respond to through policy and strategy. This insight connects climate security scholarship with broader debates about securitization and strategic adaptation. Climate change therefore provides an important foundation for understanding why Arctic security has become a growing concern for Canada and other Arctic states.

At the same time, much of the literature focuses on the broader regional implications of climate change rather than examining how environmental transformation becomes incorporated into specific national security strategies. While scholars clearly demonstrate that climate change is reshaping the Arctic security environment, less attention has been devoted to how states translate these changes into concrete strategic priorities. This limitation is particularly relevant in the Canadian case, where climate change is increasingly linked to sovereignty, infrastructure, defence and Indigenous governance concerns. Examining how Canada incorporates climate change into Arctic security strategy therefore provides an opportunity to connect climate security scholarship with state level strategic adaptation.

2.4 Indigenous governance in Arctic security debates

Indigenous communities are not peripheral actors in this context, but are central stakeholders whose land, waters and livelihoods are directly affected by both climate change and security initiatives (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). For this reason, Indigenous governance cannot be treated as a secondary issue in Arctic politics, even if it is often treated that way in security scholarship. Narrative analysis suggests that Arctic security debates frequently prioritize state centred concerns such as sovereignty, strategic competition and militarization, while giving comparatively less attention to human security and governance issues (Padrtova, 2019). Indigenous rights and governance have been uneven within security narratives and are often framed as secondary to state strategic objectives (Padrtova, 2019). While Arctic politics increasingly recognizes Indigenous participation, the security literature remains more consistent in examining state interests than in treating Indigenous governance as a central category of analysis (Padrtova, 2019).

However, at the institution level, Indigenous governance has long been built into Arctic politics. The Ottawa Declaration, which established the Arctic Council in 1996, created the category of Permanent Participants in order to provide for the active participation and full consultation of Arctic Indigenous representatives within the Council's work (Arctic Council Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat, 1999). The Arctic Council continues to describe itself as a forum for cooperation, coordination and interaction among Arctic states, Arctic Indigenous Peoples and other Arctic inhabitants, which means that Indigenous governance is embedded in the formal political architecture of the region rather than existing outside of it (Arctic Council, 2020). This is important because it shows that Indigenous governance is not an external addition to Arctic politics, but part of how Arctic governance has been structured institutionally (Arctic Council, 2020; Arctic Council Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat, 1999).

Indigenous organizations themselves also frame governance, community wellbeing and self-determination as central to Arctic security. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) argues in its contribution to the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework that sovereignty and sovereign rights require healthy and sustainable communities across Inuit Nunangat, and that Inuit must be equal partners in Arctic governance and international relations (ITK, 2019). More recently, ITK's *An Inuit Vision for Arctic Sovereignty, Security and Defence* has made this connection even more explicit by arguing that Canadian Arctic security and defence policy must be grounded in Inuit rights, Inuit knowledge and Inuit-led governance, rather than treating Inuit only as local stakeholders within a state-defined security agenda (ITK, 2025). These interventions are significant because they show that Indigenous actors do not simply respond to state security frameworks, but produce their own understandings of Arctic governance, sovereignty and security (ITK, 2019, 2025).

This creates an important tension in the literature. On one hand, Arctic governance structures and Indigenous political organizations clearly demonstrate that Indigenous governance is central to the region's politics (Arctic Council, 2020; ITK, 2019). On the other hand, dominant security narratives continue to privilege sovereignty, strategic competition and militarization (Padrtova, 2019). The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) has argued that Inuit marine governance is an essential guarantor of human and environmental security in the Canadian Arctic, a formulation that differs significantly from state-centred strategic discourse (ICC, 2023). Similarly, ICC's declaration on resource development principles stresses that Inuit must be active and equal partners in decision-making affecting Inuit Nunaat, reinforcing the idea that governance is often present in Arctic politics, but unevenly treated in security literature, where it remains secondary to state-centred concerns more often than not (ICC, 2011, 2023). For this thesis, this gap is important because it allows analysis of whether Indigenous governance in Canadian Arctic strategy is framed as genuine partnership, as a source of legitimacy for sovereignty, or as a site of tension between security priorities and self-determination.

2.5 Canadian Arctic policy, sovereignty and strategic adaptation

Canadian Arctic policy has long been shaped by concerns surrounding sovereignty, territorial control and northern governance. Unlike broader regional studies that focus on Arctic geopolitics as a whole, scholarship on Canadian Arctic policy examines how Canada responds to changing environmental and geopolitical conditions through national strategy and policy development. Much of this literature identifies sovereignty as one of the central organizing principles of Canadian Arctic policy (Griffiths, 2008; Huebert, 2009).

Earlier scholarship often emphasized Canada's efforts to demonstrate effective occupation, governance and control across its northern territories. Sovereignty concerns became particularly important in relation to the Northwest Passage, where Canada maintains that the water constitute internal waters while several other states continue to view them as an international strait (Huebert, 2009). These debates reinforced the importance of surveillance, presence and governance within Canadian Arctic policy and contributed to a long standing focus on demonstrating Canadian authority in the North.

At the same time, Canadian Arctic policy has traditionally balanced sovereignty concerns with cooperation and diplomacy. Griffiths argues that the Arctic should not be understood solely through the lens of military competition, but also as a region characterized by cooperation, stewardship and institutional engagement (Griffiths, 2008). This perspective aligns closely with broader Arctic scholarship that describes the post-Cold War Arctic as a region where governance and cooperation frequently took

precedence over strategic rivalry (Jacobsen, 2013). From this viewpoint, Canadian Arctic policy historically emphasized stability and collaboration rather than confrontation.

More recent scholarship suggests that Canadian Arctic policy is undergoing a process of strategic adaptation. As climate change increases accessibility and geopolitical competition intensifies, policymakers have placed greater emphasis on surveillance, domain awareness, defence infrastructure and operational readiness. Examining Canada's 2024 defence policy update, Lackenbauer argues that the Arctic is increasingly positioned as a central strategic priority rather than a peripheral policy concern. The renewed emphasis on Arctic security reflects growing concern about great power competition, continental defence and the need to respond to a rapidly changing northern security environment (Lackenbauer, 2024).

Lackenbauer's analysis is particularly useful because it highlights how contemporary Canadian strategy combines long standing sovereignty objectives with new defence and security priorities. Rather than abandoning earlier commitments to stewardship and governance, recent policy increasingly integrates these concerns with investments in surveillance systems, NORAD modernization, military infrastructure and Arctic operational capabilities (Lackenbauer, 2024). This suggests that Canadian Arctic policy has evolved from primarily demonstrating sovereignty toward actively preparing for a more contested and strategically significant Arctic environment.

The literature on strategic adaptation is particularly useful for understanding this transformation. Security strategy can be understood as the process through which states translate changing threat perceptions into coordinated political and military action. Strategic adaptation therefore involves more than identifying

new threats. It also includes changes in priorities, institutions, capabilities and policy instruments. From this perspective, the evolution of Canadian Arctic policy can be understood as an attempt to respond to new environmental and geopolitical pressures while maintaining long standing sovereignty objectives.

This literature is valuable because it highlights that Canadian Arctic strategy evolves over time rather than remaining static. However, much of the scholarship focuses either on sovereignty debates or on broader Arctic security developments. Less attention has been devoted to examining how climate change, geopolitical competition and Indigenous governance are incorporated simultaneously into Canadian security strategy. This creates an opportunity for further research into how multiple pressures interact to shape strategic adaptation within the Canadian Arctic context.

2.6 The gap between discourse and strategy

The existing scholarship on Arctic security has made important contributions by demonstrating that security is constructed through discourse rather than determined solely by material capabilities or geography (Buzan et al., 1998; Padrtova, 2019). Studies such as Padrtova's *Frozen narratives: How media presents security in the Arctic* show how media and political narratives shape what is recognized as a security issue, highlighting the role of framing, representation and audience reception (Padrtova, 2019). Similarly, historical analyses such as Jacobsen's *The Development of the Arctic security discourse* trace the evolution of Arctic security discourse from post-Cold War cooperation to renewed strategic competition (Jacobsen, 2013). Together, this literature illustrates that Arctic security is dynamic and socially constructed. It is shaped by changing geopolitical conditions and evolving narratives (Jacobsen, 2013; Padrtova, 2019).

However, while discourse-based approaches are effective at identifying how Arctic security is framed and how narratives have shifted over time, they do not consistently explain how these framings translate into concrete security strategies (Padrtova, 2019). In other words, the literature is strong at answering how Arctic threats are narrated, but less consistent in explaining how those narratives become institutionalized in state policy, defence planning and official strategy documents. The connection between securitized narratives and policy adaptation is underdeveloped, particularly at the level of specific states. Much of the existing research remains focused on regional patterns or media representations, leaving open the question of how discourse becomes a real part of defence planning, institutional commitments and strategic documents (Jacobsen, 2013; Padrtova, 2019). This creates an important gap at the level of state-specific strategy. While regional Arctic security literature identifies broad patterns of cooperation, competition and securitization, it often leaves less room for examining how these narratives are filtered through a particular national context. This is especially relevant for Canada, where Arctic strategy is shaped not only by regional geopolitical change, but also by sovereignty claims, northern infrastructure, continental defence, alliance commitments and Indigenous governance. The University of Calgary's collection of Canadian Arctic sovereignty and security documents is useful here because it shows that Canada has a long and substantial documentary record through which the relationship between discourse, sovereignty and security policy can be traced over time (University of Calgary, n.d.).

This gap matters because security strategy is not only a matter of how threats are described, but also of how states organize priorities and instruments in response to those descriptions. A threat narrative may shape the kinds of policies that become legitimate, urgent or politically acceptable (Balzacq, 2005; Buzan et al., 1998). Yet without tracing the movement from discourse to strategy, it remains difficult to assess whether securitized framings remain rhetorical or whether they become embedded in actual policy priorities. This is especially important in the Canadian case, where Arctic strategy involves sovereignty concerns, defence modernization, alliance commitments, environmental change and Indigenous governance. A further limitation is that Indigenous and human security concerns are often discussed

separately from state security strategy. Greaves argues that although international relations has increasingly recognized the political significance of Indigenous peoples, security studies have not fully incorporated Indigenous peoples theoretically or empirically (Greaves, 2016). Hossain similarly connects securitization theory with human security in order to show how Arctic security can be understood from community perspectives, not only from the perspective of states (Hossain, 2016). This matters for the present thesis because Indigenous governance is not simply an additional theme but part of the question of how Arctic security is defined, whose security is prioritized and how state strategy incorporates or sidelines non-state political actors (Greaves, 2016; Hossain, 2016).

The gap between discourse and strategy also raises the question of implementation. Even when Arctic issues are framed as urgent security priorities, this does not automatically show whether policy capacity, infrastructure, emergency preparedness or institutional coordination are sufficient. In the Canadian case, this distinction is especially important because Arctic sovereignty and security are closely connected to the preparedness and resilience of northern and Indigenous communities. The 2023 House of Commons report on Arctic security, sovereignty and emergency preparedness of Indigenous communities shows that security discourse is not only about strategic language, but also about practical questions of infrastructure, emergency response and community capacity (House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 2023). This suggests that the discourse-to-strategy gap is also a gap between official framing and the material or institutional capability required to act on that framing (House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 2023).

By examining Canadian policy texts and tracing how securitized framings of climate change, sovereignty and foreign presence are reflected in official strategy plans, this thesis seeks to bridge the gap between the construction of Arctic security discourse and the evolution of state security strategy. Rather than treating discourse and policy as separate fields, the thesis examines how narratives of threat become connected to strategic adaptation. This allows the analysis to ask not only how Arctic security is framed, but how those

framings shape Canada's evolving Arctic security posture over time. In doing so, this thesis responds to three related gaps in the literature: the gap between regional discourse and state-specific strategy, the gap between state security and Indigenous or human security perspectives, and the gap between securitized language and policy implementation.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Defining security strategy

The concept of security strategy builds on classical strategic thought, but extends beyond the battlefield into the broader domain of state policy. Carl von Clausewitz defined strategy as “the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war” and argued that war constitutes “a continuation of policy by other means” (von Clausewitz, 1832/2006). Clausewitz's main contribution was in establishing that the use of force is subordinate to political objectives. Therefore, strategy is not an autonomous military activity but a mechanism through which political goals are pursued. This insight remains important even in contemporary security studies because it establishes that strategy cannot be understood as purely operational or military planning. Rather, strategy must be understood in relation to the political purposes it is meant to serve. In this sense, Clausewitz (1832/2006) provides the foundation for viewing strategy as a state-level process of aligning action with broader objectives. For this thesis, that point is especially important because it allows security strategy to be understood not simply as defence planning, but as a broader political response to perceived threats.

The modern understanding of security strategy expands on this logic beyond the action of war. Colin S. Gray conceptualizes strategy as the bridge between political purpose and military means, emphasizing the connection between ends, ways and means under conditions of uncertainty (Gray, 2010). In this form, strategy connects national interests to the instruments available to advance or defend them. Gray's

formulation is particularly useful because it moves the concept of strategy beyond a narrow association with armed conflict alone. The language of ends, ways and means makes clear that strategy is concerned with defining objectives, selecting the methods through which those objectives are pursued and matching them with available resources and capabilities. This broader understanding is especially relevant in the field of security strategy, where states rarely rely on military power alone. Instead, they draw on a combination of defence, diplomacy, economic tools and institutional commitments in order to manage risk and protect national interests (Gray, 2010).

It is also useful to distinguish security strategy from adjacent concepts such as foreign policy, military doctrine or day-to-day policy responses. Foreign policy refers more broadly to a state's external relations or objectives, while military doctrine concerns the principles guiding military operations. Security strategy, by contrast, occupies a bridging role. It connects political objectives to coordinated action across multiple instruments of power and provides an organizing framework for how threats are interpreted and prioritized. This broader outlook makes security strategy especially useful for analyzing how states respond to complex and evolving environments (Gray, 2010; NATO, 2017). Looked at together, Clausewitz and Gray highlight two essential characteristics of security strategy. First, it is inherently political because it is derived from the objectives of the state. Second, it involves the deliberate organization of available instruments to address perceived threats within a changing international environment (Gray, 2010; von Clausewitz, 1832/2006). In this thesis, security strategy is therefore understood as the process through which a state interprets its security environment and translates that interpretation into coordinated action. Security strategy is therefore defined here as a political process through which states interpret perceived threats and translate them into coordinated action. This definition is important because it links the interpretation of threat directly to strategic response, providing a conceptual bridge between structural change and securitization theory. Once a security strategy is defined in these terms, the next question becomes how and why it changes over time.

This understanding also reflects Clausewitz's central insight that strategy is fundamentally political in nature. Security strategy is not simply a collection of military capabilities or defence plans, but a process through which states pursue broader political objectives. In practice, this means that strategy is not shaped only by external threats, but also by the political goals that governments seek to achieve. In the Canadian arctic context, these objectives extend beyond defence and deterrence to include sovereignty, governance, alliance commitments and Indigenous partnership. Understanding security strategy as a political process therefore provides an important foundation for analyzing why particular issues become strategic priorities and how policy responses are developed.

3.2 Strategy, Politics and State Objectives

Clausewitz's argument that war is a continuation of politics by other means suggests that strategy cannot be separated from the political purposes it is intended to serve (von Clausewitz, 1832/2006). While contemporary security strategy extends beyond military conflict, the underlying principle remains relevant. States do not develop security strategies simply because threats exist. Rather, they develop strategies to protect political objectives that they consider important. Strategy therefore reflects not only external conditions but also the priorities, values and responsibilities of the state.

This perspective is particularly useful for understanding the Canadian Arctic. Canadian Arctic strategy is not solely concerned with defending territory from military threats. It is also connected to broader political objectives including the protection of sovereignty, the maintenance of northern governance, commitments to Indigenous rights and participation in international institutions such as NATO and NORAD (Government of Canada, 2017, 2019). As a result, Arctic security strategy must be understood as serving multiple political purposes simultaneously.

The Canadian case also demonstrates that security strategy is shaped by domestic governance obligations as well as external pressures. Modern treaties, land claim agreements and commitments to reconciliation have created institutional expectations regarding Indigenous participation in Arctic governance (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). Consequently, strategic adaptation in the Arctic is not simply a reaction to geopolitical competition or environmental change. It also occurs within a political and governance framework that requires attention to questions of legitimacy, authority and partnership.

This understanding is important for the present study because it helps explain why Indigenous governance appears repeatedly throughout Canadian Arctic policy. Indigenous participation is not only relevant as a governance issue but also as part of the broader political context within which security strategy is developed. Security strategy in the Canadian Arctic is therefore a reflection of the interactions between external threats, political objectives and governance responsibilities.

Unlike many traditional security cases, the Canadian Arctic is governed within a constitutional framework that recognizes Indigenous rights and establishes obligations regarding consultation, partnership and self-government (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). Security strategy is therefore developed within legal and political constraints that do not arise solely from external threats. This means that Canadian Arctic strategy cannot be understood only through military or geopolitical considerations. It must also account for constitutional commitments that shape how sovereignty, governance and security are pursued. In this sense, constitutional obligations become part of the strategic environment within which Arctic security strategy is formulated and implemented.

3.3 Structural change and strategic adaptation

If security strategy is the process through which states interpret threats and organize responses, it is also necessary to explain why those strategies change over time. One important answer is that strategic change reflects shifts in the broader international environment. Strategic change can be understood as a response to shifts in the structure of the international system. In structural realist theory, Kenneth Waltz argues that the defining feature of the international system is anarchy, meaning the absence of a central authority above states (Little, 2007; Waltz, 1979). Under conditions of anarchy, states must rely on self-help to ensure their survival (Waltz, 1979). As a result, their behaviour is shaped not only by domestic characteristics, but also by the structure of the system itself (Little, 2007; Waltz, 1979). For Waltz, structure depends primarily on the distribution of capabilities across states, especially military and economic power (Waltz, 1979). Changes in the distribution of capabilities alter the strategic environment and create new constraints and incentives. Therefore, strategy is not formed in isolation, but develops through adaptation to changing external structural conditions (Little, 2007; Waltz, 1979).

From Waltz's perspective, strategic change occurs when the international environment itself changes. Shifts in power distribution, the emergence of new competitors, technological transformation, or changes in geographic accessibility can modify the strategic environment (Little, 2007). As the structure of interaction evolves, states adjust their security strategies in response to new risks and opportunities. Strategic adaptation in this sense reflects systemic transformation rather than purely domestic preference (Little, 2007). Walt's framework is particularly useful because it draws attention to how large-scale changes in the international system affect state priorities even when those changes are not directly initiated by the state itself. Strategic environments may shift because of the rise of new powers, the decline of existing ones, advances in technology or changes in the operational significance of certain regions. Under such conditions, states must continually reassess what matters for their security and how best to protect it. In other words, structural realism helps explain why strategic adaptation becomes necessary. It shows that changing environments generate new pressures to revise how threats are

understood and how resources are organized. However, structural change alone does not fully explain why states respond differently to similar external developments. Not every change in capability produces the same strategic response, and not every state interprets external developments in identical ways. This is where Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory adds an important refinement.

Building on structural realism, Stephen Walt refines the explanation of strategic adaptation by arguing that states respond not solely to power distribution but to perceived threats (Walt, 1990). In his balance of threat theory, Walt identifies four factors that shape threat perception: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities and perceived aggressive intentions (Walt, 1990). States adjust their alignment behaviour and strategic posture in response not only to asymmetries of power but to how threatening another actor appears within a given structural context (Walt, 1990). This introduces a crucial interpretive dimension to strategic change, since responses are mediated through perception rather than determined mechanically by material capabilities alone (Walt, 1990). Walt's argument suggests that transformation in geography, access or military reach can alter how threats are evaluated and prioritized. Changes in proximity or vulnerability may intensify perceived risks even in the absence of dramatic power shifts. Strategic adaptation therefore occurs when systemic developments reshape how states interpret their security environment (Walt, 1990). In this way, structural transformation generates shifts in security strategy through changing threat perception (Walt, 1990).

Taken together, Waltz and Walt provide a strong theoretical basis for explaining why security strategies change over time. Waltz shows that states operate within an anarchic international system in which changes in the distribution of capabilities alter the broader strategic environment (Little, 2007; Waltz, 1979). Walt builds on this by showing that these changes matter not only at the level of material structure, but also at the level of perceived threat (Walt, 1990). Strategic adaptation therefore emerges through the interaction of systemic transformation and threat interpretation. States revise strategy when changing conditions reshape how risks, vulnerabilities and opportunities are understood. Yet while these approaches

explain why states adapt strategy, they do not fully explain how particular issues come to be politically framed as security threats in the first place. That question is addressed in the next subsection through securitization theory.

3.4 Securitization theory

While structural change and threat perception help explain why states may revise strategy over time, they do not fully explain how particular developments come to be understood politically as security threats. Securitization theory addresses this problem by shifting attention away from objective conditions alone and toward the discursive and political processes through which threats are constructed (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Developed by Ole Wæver and later formalized by the Copenhagen School, securitization theory argues that security is not an objective condition but a discursive process (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). For Wæver, security is best understood as a speech act, meaning that issues become matters of security through the act of being publicly framed as existential threats rather than through any automatic or objective quality they possess (Wæver, 1995). In this view, issues do not become security concerns automatically. Rather, they become security issues when political actors frame them as existential threats that require urgent attention and exceptional responses (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995).

At the core of securitization theory is the claim that an issue becomes a matter of security when it is presented by a securitizing actor as an existential threat to a valued referent object, such as the state, sovereignty, territorial integrity or a particular community (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). This framing is important because it seeks to move the issue beyond ordinary political debate and justify urgent and potentially extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). In this sense, securitization does not merely identify a threat, but legitimizes the treatment of that threat as exceptional

by linking it to the survival of a valued referent object, whether the state, sovereignty, territorial integrity or another politically significant entity (Buzan et al., 1998). The theory therefore places strong emphasis on the speech act, meaning the act of publicly identifying something as a security threat (Wæver, 1995). However, the securitizing move is not successful simply because an actor declares it to be so. Successful securitization depends on audience acceptance, since it is the audience's recognition of the threat that legitimizes the proposed response (Balzacq, 2005; Buzan et al., 1998). Later scholarship has refined this point by emphasizing that effective securitization is audience centered and context dependent, meaning that the success of a securitizing move depends not only on the claim itself, but also on whether it resonates within a particular political and institutional setting (Balzacq, 2005). In this way, securitization theory explains security not as a fixed condition but as a political process through which issues are elevated, prioritized and legitimized (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995).

This approach is useful because it distinguishes security from adjacent political categories. Not every important issue is securitized and not every risk becomes a matter of security policy. What makes securitization distinctive is the move from ordinary politics into a register of existential urgency (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Once an issue is framed as threatening the survival or integrity of a valued referent object, political actors may claim that exceptional actions are justified (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). In this sense, securitization is distinctive because it legitimizes extraordinary measures by presenting the issue as one that cannot be managed through the routines of normal politics (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Securitization theory therefore helps explain why some issues are treated as requiring immediate intervention, while others remain within the sphere of routine policymaking (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). It also highlights that the meaning of security depends not only on material developments, but on the ways in which those developments are narrated, interpreted and accepted within political discourse (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). At the same time, later scholarship has emphasized that securitizing moves do not succeed equally across all contexts, since their effectiveness depends on

audience reception, institutional setting and broader political conditions (Balzacq, 2005; McDonald, 2008).

Within security scholarship more broadly, securitization theory has been important because it shifts analysis away from treating security as purely a matter of military capabilities or material competition (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Instead, it draws attention to language, representation and the social construction of threat (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). In Arctic scholarship, this approach has encouraged researchers to examine how issues are defined as security concerns through recurring narratives and patterns of representation (Jacobsen, 2013; Padrtova, 2019). Padrtova's analysis of media portrayals of Arctic security, for example, shows how recurring frames help shape what is recognized as a security issue and what remains marginalized (Padrtova, 2019). Jacobsen's account of the development of Arctic security discourse similarly shows that Arctic narratives have shifted over time from post-Cold War cooperation toward greater emphasis on sovereignty, competition and strategic awareness (Jacobsen, 2013). This is especially relevant because discourse-focused approaches reveal that security debates are not only about geography or capability, but also about how risks are interpreted and made meaningful by political actors and audiences (Heininen et al., 2019; Padrtova, 2019). At the same time, this literature also suggests that some concerns, such as sovereignty, militarization and strategic competition, tend to receive greater attention than human security and governance questions (Heininen et al., 2019; Padrtova, 2019). This imbalance is important because other Arctic scholarship has emphasized that environmental security, human security, governance and Indigenous self-determination are also central to how security in the region is understood, even when they receive less attention in dominant strategic narratives (Heininen et al., 2019, 2020).

For this thesis, securitization theory is valuable because it provides a framework for understanding how changing conditions become politically meaningful as security concerns. It helps explain how threats are

not merely observed, but constructed through discourse and accepted through political processes (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). This makes the theory particularly useful for analyzing how security priorities are formed, how certain issues are elevated above others, and how strategic responses become justified over time (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). In combination with the previous subsection on structural change and strategic adaptation, securitization theory adds the missing interpretive layer. If structural approaches explain why environments change, securitization theory explains how those changes come to be framed as matters of security (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). This provides the conceptual basis for examining how strategic priorities are shaped not only by material developments, but also by the political construction of threat. At the same time, later scholarship has emphasized that securitizing moves do not succeed equally across all contexts, since their effectiveness depends on audience reception, institutional setting and broader political conditions (Balzacq, 2005; McDonald, 2008).

3.5 Combined analytical framework

Strategic change can be understood as a response to shifts in the structure of the international system (Little, 2007; Waltz, 1979). Security is not an objective condition but a discursive process (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). However, looked at separately, these approaches explain different parts of the problem. Clausewitz and Gray provide the broader foundation by explaining strategy as a political process that links objectives to action (Gray, 2010; von Clausewitz, 1832/2006). Waltz and Walt explain why strategic environments change and why states adapt to new pressures (Little, 2007; Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1990). Securitization theory explains how those changes are interpreted and transformed into security priorities through political discourse (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Together, these approaches make it possible to explain not only why the Arctic security environment is changing, but also why certain developments become central to Canadian strategy.

Strategy is not just formed in isolation but happens due to adaptations in external structural conditions (Little, 2007; Waltz, 1979). An issue becomes a security concern when it is presented by a securitizing actor as an existential threat to a valued referent object, such as the state, sovereignty, territorial integrity or a particular community (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Structural approaches explain why the strategic environment changes, while securitization theory explains how those changes are interpreted, narrated and elevated into matters of security.

From Waltz's perspective, strategic change occurs when the international environment itself changes (Little, 2007; Waltz, 1979). Shifts in power distribution, emerging competitors, technological transformation or shifts in geographic accessibility modify the strategic environment (Little, 2007). As the structure of interactions evolves, states adjust their security strategies to address new risks and opportunities (Little, 2007). Strategic adaptation thus reflects systemic transformation rather than purely domestic preference (Little, 2007). Building on structural realism, Stephen Walt refines the explanation of strategic adaptation by arguing that states do not respond solely to power distribution but to perceived threats (Walt, 1990). States adjust their alignment behaviour and strategic posture in response to power asymmetries and how threatening another actor appears within a given structural context (Walt, 1990). Together, these approaches explain why security strategies change over time, particularly when access, capabilities, geography and threat perceptions are transformed. However, they do not fully explain why some developments become central to security discourse while others do not.

Securitization theory explains how something becomes a security issue when presented by a securitizing actor as an existential threat to a referent object (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). The securitizing actor has the ability to then make something more than a political issue by posing it as something that needs extraordinary measures to handle (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). The success of the process is only accepted if the individuals who could be impacted by the threat support the proposed measures and

significant actions taken (Balzacq, 2005; Buzan et al., 1998). In this way, securitization theory adds the interpretive dimension that structural theories alone cannot provide. It explains not only that the security environment is changing, but also how those changes are politically constructed, prioritized and legitimized.

For this thesis, the most useful approach is to combine structural change and securitization theory. Structural change explains why the Arctic security environment is shifting in response to climate change, increased accessibility, international competition and regional militarization (Arctic Council, 2009; Dodds, 2010; Jacobsen, 2013). Securitization theory explains how these developments are framed in official documents and political discourse as threats to sovereignty, stability or national interest (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Security strategy is understood here as the point at which these structural pressures and discursive constructions are translated into coordinated policy. Following Clausewitz, these strategic adaptations are understood not as responses to threats alone, but as political choices designed to protect broader state objectives, including sovereignty, governance and territorial control (von Clausewitz, 1832/2006). The Canadian case further suggests that strategic adaptation occurs within a framework of governance obligations and constitutional responsibilities. Arctic policy must respond not only to changing environmental and geopolitical conditions, but also to commitments related to Indigenous rights, co-development and northern governance (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). This means that Canadian Arctic security strategy cannot be understood purely through military or geopolitical considerations. It must also be understood as a political process through which security, sovereignty and governance objectives are balanced and reconciled. In this way, strategy is neither the automatic result of material change nor the product of discourse alone, but the outcome of their interactions.

Based on this framework, the empirical analysis is organized around six analytical categories: climate change as a threat multiplier, sovereignty and territorial control, Russia as a military threat, China as a

strategic and economic challenger, militarization and defence modernization, and Indigenous governance as partnership, legitimacy and site of tension.

Climate change, increasing shipping access, foreign military activity and Indigenous governance are not inherently security issues. They become security issues when political actors deem them to be threats to sovereignty, stability or national interest (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Through securitization theory, this study links discourse directly to strategy and explains how Canada's Arctic security policy adapts in a changing geopolitical and environmental context. The combined analytical framework therefore makes it possible to examine both sides of the process: why the Arctic security environment is changing, and how Canadian policymakers interpret those changes and convert them into strategic priorities. This provides the bridge between the theoretical discussion in this chapter and the empirical analysis that follows.

This understanding also allows security strategy to be viewed as broader than any single policy document. Security strategy may instead emerge across multiple institutions, policy frameworks and governance arrangements that collectively organize responses to perceived threats. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Canadian Arctic, where security objectives are articulated across defence, foreign policy, Arctic governance and Indigenous partnership frameworks rather than through a single Arctic security strategy document.

4. Methodology and Research Design

4.1 Research design

This thesis adopts a qualitative single-case study design focused on Canada's Arctic security strategy. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the thesis is concerned with how security meanings are constructed, framed and translated into strategic priorities, rather than with measuring causal effects statistically. The Canadian case is examined in order to understand how climate change, sovereignty concerns, international competition, regional militarization and Indigenous governance are incorporated into Arctic security discourse and policy.

To address these questions, the study analyzes key Canadian defence and foreign policy documents related to the Arctic in order to identify how climate change, sovereignty and geopolitical competition are framed as security concerns. It also examines political and institutional discourse, including parliamentary debates and official communications, to assess how foreign presence and regional militarization are constructed within Canadian security narratives. In addition, the research explores how Indigenous rights and governance are referenced and incorporated within Arctic security policy, and where discursive and policy-level tensions emerge between security objectives and Indigenous self-determination.

The study situates Canada's Arctic strategy within the broader context of Arctic security dynamics, including NATO and NORAD commitments, in order to clarify Canada's strategic positioning within an evolving regional security environment. However, the research design remains focused on Canada as a single case, rather than offering a full comparative study of all Arctic states. This allows the thesis to examine in greater depth how broader environmental and geopolitical transformations are reflected in Canadian policy texts and security narratives over time.

4.2 Case selection

Canada is selected as the case study for this thesis because it combines several of the central dynamics shaping contemporary Arctic security. Canada has the world's largest Arctic coastline and is facing growing pressure to assert its sovereignty while maintaining environmental protection and Indigenous rights (Government of Canada, 2019; Natural Resources Canada, 2024). This makes Canada a particularly useful case for examining how Arctic security strategy is formed under overlapping environmental, geopolitical and domestic governance pressures. As the Arctic becomes more accessible due to climate change, the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, including the Northwest Passage, is becoming more relevant to commercial shipping, strategic transit and broader questions of sovereignty and control (Arctic Council, 2009). The Canadian case is therefore useful because it brings together physical transformation, strategic vulnerability and legal-political questions of territorial control within one national context. Unlike a broader regional study of the Arctic, a focused case study of Canada makes it possible to examine how these pressures are reflected in a specific state's security documents, policy language and strategic priorities.

For Canada, these developments create a complex policy environment. On one hand, the federal government must protect sovereignty and ensure national security in the North. On the other, it must uphold commitments to environmental stewardship and Indigenous rights and governance (Government of Canada, 2019). Indigenous communities are not peripheral actors in this context, but central stakeholders whose land, water and livelihoods are directly affected by both climate change and security initiatives (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). Canada is therefore not only an Arctic state with territorial and strategic interests, but also a state whose Arctic policy must be understood in relation to Indigenous governance, rights and self-determination (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). This makes Canada especially valuable for this thesis because Indigenous governance is not an external or secondary issue, but part of the policy environment in which Arctic security strategy is developed. The case therefore allows the thesis to examine whether Indigenous rights and governance are treated as

genuine components of Arctic security strategy, as sources of legitimacy for Canadian sovereignty, or as areas of tension with state security priorities.

Canada is also exposed to a changing geopolitical environment in the Arctic. Russia's expanded military activity and China's growing strategic and economic interest in the region have contributed to renewed attention to Arctic security and to questions of deterrence, presence and cooperation (Jacobsen, 2013; Østhagen, 2021). This makes Canada a strong case for studying how a state adapts security strategy when climate change, foreign presence, regional militarization and Indigenous governance intersect. The case selection supports the broader purpose of the thesis, which is to analyze how changing Arctic conditions are interpreted, securitized and translated into Canadian strategic adaptation over time.

4.3 Sources and corpus

This study is based on a purposive corpus of official Canadian policy documents, defence strategy texts, parliamentary materials, official communications and Indigenous governance sources related to Arctic security. The corpus is selected because these materials make it possible to examine how climate change, sovereignty and geopolitical competition are framed as security concerns. Rather than attempting to analyze every Canadian Arctic-related document, the study focuses on sources that are directly relevant to security, defence, foreign policy, northern governance and Indigenous rights.

The primary corpus consists of key Canadian defence and foreign policy documents related to the Arctic. These include *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* from 2017, which provides an important baseline for Canada's defence priorities (Government of Canada, 2017); the *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* from 2019, which sets out Canada's long term strategic vision for the Arctic and North (Government of Canada, 2019); the Royal Canadian Navy's *Arctic and Northern Strategic*

Framework from 2023, which is useful because it connects higher level strategy with naval activity in the Arctic (Royal Canadian Navy, 2023); Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence from 2024, which directly addresses Canada's defence posture in a changing northern and global security environment (Government of Canada, 2024); and Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy from 2024, which outlines Canada's diplomatic strategy for engagement in and on the Arctic (Global Affairs Canada, 2024). These documents are central because they show how Canadian Arctic security is officially articulated across defence, foreign policy and northern governance. Strong, Secure, Engaged provides direction on Canadian defence priorities over a 20-year period, while the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework sets out a long-term vision for governance, development and security in the Arctic and North (Government of Canada, 2017, 2019). Together, these documents provide important baseline statements of Canada's evolving Arctic strategy (Government of Canada, 2017, 2019).

The study also examines political and institutional discourse, including parliamentary debates and official communications, to assess how foreign presence and regional militarization are constructed within Canadian security narratives. These sources may include ministerial statements, official backgrounders, parliamentary committee materials and selected government communications that clarify how Canadian policymakers explain Arctic security priorities publicly. For example, official launch materials for Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy describe it as intended to respond to new and emerging threats and to advance the priorities of territorial, provincial, First Nations, Inuit, Métis, Modern Treaty and Self-Governing partners (Global Affairs Canada, 2024). These sources are useful because they show how formal policy documents are communicated, justified and connected to wider political narratives.

The research also explores how Indigenous rights and governance are referenced and incorporated within Arctic security policy, and where discursive and policy-level tensions emerge between security objectives and Indigenous self-determination. Because Indigenous governance is central to the research question, the

corpus includes selected Indigenous and northern governance materials. These include Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami documents, Inuit Circumpolar Council materials and Arctic Council documents on Indigenous participation where they speak directly to sovereignty, security, governance or community wellbeing (ICC, 2011; ITK, 2019). These sources help ensure that Indigenous governance is not treated only as a theme within federal policy, but also as a political perspective articulated by Indigenous organizations themselves (ICC, 2011; ITK, 2019).

Finally, the study situates Canada's Arctic strategy within the broader context of Arctic security dynamics, including NATO and NORAD commitments, in order to clarify Canada's strategic positioning within an evolving regional security environment. These materials are not treated as a separate comparative case, but as contextual sources that help explain Canada's position within a changing alliance and continental defence environment. This includes Canadian NORAD modernization materials and NATO sources on Arctic security and Arctic Sentry. NORAD modernization materials are relevant because Canada describes its modernization plan as part of the response to the growing threat environment affecting Canada, the Arctic and North America more broadly (Government of Canada, 2024). NATO's Arctic security materials are also relevant because NATO launched Arctic Sentry in February 2026 as a military activity intended to strengthen deterrence and defence across the Arctic and High North (NATO, 2026a, 2026b). These sources are included only as contextual materials, helping to situate Canadian Arctic strategy within the broader alliance environment, rather than replacing the thesis's focus on Canadian policy documents.

Overall, the corpus is designed to support a qualitative document analysis of how Canadian Arctic security strategy is framed, justified and adapted over time. It allows the thesis to trace how climate change, sovereignty, geopolitical competition, foreign presence, militarization and Indigenous governance are represented across official Canadian strategy documents and related institutional discourse.

4.4 Method of analysis

This thesis uses qualitative document analysis informed by securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). The method is used to examine how Arctic security is framed in official Canadian policy and political discourse, and how these framings are translated into strategic priorities over time. A qualitative document-based approach is appropriate because the research is concerned less with measuring causal effects statistically than with interpreting how security meanings are constructed, communicated and institutionalized in official texts (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995).

The analysis focuses on key Canadian defence and foreign policy documents related to the Arctic to identify how climate change, sovereignty and geopolitical competition are framed as security concerns. It also includes political and institutional discourse, including parliamentary debates and official communications, to assess how foreign presence and regional militarization are constructed within Canadian security narratives. In addition, the research explores how Indigenous rights and governance are referenced and incorporated within Arctic security policy, and where discursive and policy-level tensions emerge between security objectives and Indigenous self-determination.

These materials are read not only as descriptive records of policy, but as political texts that help define what counts as a security issue, which threats are prioritized and which policy responses become justified. In this sense, the method is discourse-sensitive, because it pays attention to language, framing, threat construction and strategic emphasis (Buzan et al., 1998; Padrtova, 2019). At the same time, it remains grounded in document analysis rather than attempting a full media or linguistic discourse analysis across all possible texts.

Securitization theory provides the main interpretive lens for the analysis (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). It helps guide attention to the ways in which climate change, foreign presence, sovereignty and regional militarization are presented as security concerns. More specifically, the analysis looks at when developments are framed as threats to valued referent objects such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, national stability or northern communities, and how these framings are linked to calls for strategic action (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). The method is therefore concerned not only with what policy documents say, but with how they justify priorities, construct urgency and legitimize certain responses.

At the same time, the analysis is informed by the earlier discussion of structural change and strategic adaptation (Walt, 1990; Waltz, 1979). This means that official texts are not read in isolation, but in relation to broader transformations in the Arctic security environment, including climate change, increased accessibility, geopolitical competition and alliance commitments. In practical terms, the analysis proceeds by identifying recurring themes, concepts and framings across the selected documents. These include references to climate change, sovereignty, geopolitical competition, foreign actors, militarization, surveillance, defence modernization and Indigenous governance. Particular attention is paid to changes across documents published between 2017 and 2026 in order to identify shifts in threat perception, strategic priorities and policy responses over time. In this way, qualitative document analysis allows the thesis to connect discourse to strategy by showing how security narratives are reflected in Canada's evolving Arctic policy and defence planning.

4.5 Analytical categories

The analysis is organized around six analytical categories derived from the theoretical framework and the research questions. The first category is climate change framing. Here, the thesis examines whether

climate change is presented primarily as an environmental issue, as a threat multiplier, or as a direct security concern connected to accessibility, infrastructure, sovereignty or foreign presence. The second category is sovereignty framing, which focuses on how Canadian jurisdiction, territorial control, the Northwest Passage and the protection of the North are articulated within official security discourse.

The third category is foreign actor framing. This refers to the representation of external actors, especially Russia and China, and examines whether they are framed as military threats, strategic challengers, economic actors or broader geopolitical risks. The fourth category is military and defence language, which includes references to deterrence, surveillance, modernization, military presence, infrastructure, NATO, NORAD and other forms of defence-related strategic adaptation. This category is used to trace how security concerns are translated into defence priorities and operational language.

The fifth category is Indigenous governance framing. This examines how Indigenous rights, governance and self-determination are incorporated into Canadian Arctic security strategy, and whether Indigenous actors are framed primarily as partners, rights-holders or sources of legitimacy within Canadian Arctic policy. Together, these categories provide a structured way to trace how official texts construct Arctic security and how these constructions are reflected in Canadian strategic priorities over time.

4.6 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on publicly available policy documents, official communications and institutional texts. As a result, it can show how Arctic security is framed, justified and articulated in official discourse, but it cannot fully capture internal decision-making processes or informal policy negotiations. Second, the thesis focuses on the relationship between discourse and strategy rather than on the full implementation or effectiveness of Canadian Arctic policy. It therefore

does not attempt to measure policy outcomes directly, but instead examines how priorities and strategic responses are constructed in official texts.

A further limitation is the single-case design. Focusing on Canada allows for greater depth, but it also means that the findings are not intended to produce broad generalizations about all Arctic states. Rather, the case is used to generate a detailed understanding of how one state responds to changing Arctic conditions. In addition, qualitative document analysis involves interpretation, meaning that findings are influenced by the researcher's reading of texts. To reduce this limitation, the thesis applies a clear analytical framework and a transparent set of categories across the selected sources.

From an ethical perspective, the responsibility is to represent sources accurately, interpret texts fairly and avoid mischaracterizing the position of governments, institutions or Indigenous organizations.

5. The Changing Arctic Security Environment

5.1 Climate change and physical transformation

As the ice in the Arctic recedes due to climate change, previously inaccessible sea routes and natural resources are becoming the subject of growing geopolitical competition. Scientific research confirms that the Arctic is warming at a significantly faster rate than the global average, resulting in declining sea ice, changing ecosystems and increased navigability of northern waters (Arctic Council, 2009). The Canadian Arctic Archipelago, including the Northwest Passage, is becoming more accessible to commercial shipping and strategic transit (Arctic Council, 2009). This shift alters the physical and political geography of the region. What was once largely insulated by ice is now increasingly integrated into global trade routes and strategic calculations (Arctic Council, 2009).

As accessibility grows, so does the potential for resource extraction, foreign presence and strategic competition (Arctic Council, 2009). In this sense, climate change is not only an environmental development, but also a transformation of the Arctic's strategic landscape. Melting sea ice does not simply reveal new waterways. It also changes how the region is imagined, governed and valued by states (Heininen et al., 2020). The Arctic is increasingly seen as a space of mobility, access and opportunity, rather than as a distant and frozen frontier. This physical transformation has therefore contributed directly to the region's changing political significance by increasing accessibility, expanding opportunities for economic activity and drawing greater strategic attention from both Arctic and non-Arctic states (Heininen et al., 2020).

For Canada, these developments create a complex policy environment. The physical transformation of the Arctic matters because it affects sovereignty, governance and strategic control at the same time. As climate change makes Arctic waters more accessible, questions of navigation, jurisdiction and surveillance become more pressing. The Northwest Passage becomes especially important in this regard, because increased accessibility raises the practical and political significance of Canada's long-standing sovereignty claims (Arctic Council, 2009). What had previously been protected by geography and ice is now more open to movement, transit and outside attention.

At the same time, climate change does not automatically produce security competition. Rather, it creates the physical conditions under which geopolitical competition becomes more likely. Its effects intersect with wider geopolitical developments and make the Arctic more vulnerable to strategic competition. Increased activity from Russia and growing interest from actors such as China are taking place in a region that is already being reshaped by environmental change. As a result, climate change functions not only as a background condition, but as an enabling factor that makes new forms of state presence and strategic interest possible. In this way, physical transformation contributes to a broader redefinition of the Arctic from a peripheral region to one of growing international relevance (Heininen et al., 2020). In this sense, climate change functions as a threat multiplier. While it is not itself a military threat, it alters the physical

conditions of the Arctic in ways that increase exposure to other challenges, including sovereignty disputes, foreign presence and strategic competition.

The literature therefore suggests that climate change should be understood as both a material and political transformation. It changes the Arctic environment in direct physical terms through melting sea ice, altered ecosystems and changing navigation conditions (Arctic Council, 2009). But it also reconfigures the meaning of the Arctic by making the region more accessible, more contested and more visible within global strategic thinking (Heininen et al., 2020). This is important for the present thesis because it shows that the changing Arctic security environment begins with environmental transformation. Before climate change is framed as a security issue in political discourse, it is already reshaping the material conditions through which security concerns emerge. For this reason, climate change and physical transformation form the starting point for understanding the broader evolution of Arctic security and the strategic adaptations that follow.

5.3 Geopolitical tension and militarization

At the same time, the Arctic is experiencing renewed geopolitical attention as Russia expands its military presence in the region and China increases its economic, diplomatic and strategic engagement. These developments have contributed to a shift in how the Arctic is understood, from a largely cooperative space to one of growing strategic importance. China has identified itself as a “Near-Arctic State,” which has increased its visibility in Arctic affairs and given its Arctic engagement a more explicit strategic profile (The People’s Republic of China, 2018). These dynamics raise important questions about how Canada balances cooperation, deterrence and partnership in an increasingly contested region (Global Affairs Canada, 2024).

Russia is especially significant in this changing environment because militarization in the Arctic is not discussed only as a theoretical possibility, but as an ongoing strategic reality. Russia's growing military significance in the Arctic is also linked to its submarine activity. Canada's 2024 defence update states that Russian submarines are probing widely across the Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific Oceans, highlighting the underwater dimension of Arctic security and the growing relevance of maritime surveillance and deterrence for Canada (Government of Canada, 2024). Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy states that Russia is increasingly dependent on China and has reversed its historical posture by opening its Arctic to China, and notes that in July 2024 Russia and China conducted joint military exercises in the Russian High North (Global Affairs Canada, 2024). This is important because it shows that Arctic competition is not limited to sovereignty claims or symbolic acts. It increasingly involves defence coordination, military signalling and operational activity. This is significant because it demonstrates how environmental transformation and geopolitical competition interact. Increased accessibility creates opportunities for activity in the region, while growing military presence and strategic rivalry increase the security implications of that activity.

China's role is different from Russia's, but it is also strategically important. China's 2018 Arctic Policy presents China as a "Near-Arctic State" and explicitly links the Arctic to shipping routes, resource development, governance participation and long-term economic interests (The People's Republic of China, 2018). This does not mean that China is framed in identical terms to Russia. Rather, China often appears in Arctic security discussions as a strategic and economic challenger whose growing presence may alter regional balances and widen the geopolitical scope of Arctic affairs. The significance of China in Arctic discourse therefore lies not only in direct military presence, but also in the way its interests expand the number of actors involved in Arctic competition (Global Affairs Canada, 2024).

These developments have also increased the Arctic's defence relevance for Canada and its allies. Our North, Strong and Free states that the renewed defence policy will contribute to Arctic security and strengthen Canada's role within NATO (Government of Canada, 2024). NATO now describes the Arctic

and the High North as increasingly important for collective security, and in February 2026 launched Arctic Sentry as a multi-domain military activity to strengthen deterrence and defence in the region (NATO, 2026a, 2026b). This wider alliance attention reinforces the argument that the Arctic is no longer viewed mainly as a cooperative frontier, but increasingly as a strategically significant region shaped by deterrence, defence posture and geopolitical rivalry.

At the same time, recent scholarship suggests that this competitive turn should be treated carefully rather than simplistically. Østhagen argues that descriptions of the Arctic as a new security region often combine two related but distinct developments: climate-driven economic and maritime change, and Russia's military build-up and regional role (Østhagen, 2021). This is useful because it shows that militarization and geopolitical tension are real, but they do not come in isolation. They are tied to the wider physical and political transformation of the region. For this reason, renewed geopolitical attention and militarization form a central part of the changing Arctic security environment. Together with climate change and increased accessibility, they help explain why Arctic security has become a more urgent concern for Canada and its allies.

5.4 Why this matters for Canada

The changing Arctic security environment has particular significance for Canada because environmental transformation, sovereignty concerns and governance responsibilities converge in the North. As the Arctic becomes more accessible due to climate change, the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, including the Northwest Passage, is becoming more relevant to commercial shipping, strategic transit and broader questions of sovereignty and control (Arctic Council, 2009; Natural Resources Canada, 2024). At the same time, Canada must balance national security objectives with commitments to environmental stewardship and Indigenous rights and governance (Government of Canada, 2019). This means that

regional Arctic transformation matters to Canada not only because the North is part of its territory, but because physical, legal and strategic change all converge there at once.

Indigenous communities are not peripheral actors in this context, but central stakeholders whose land, water and livelihoods are directly affected by both climate change and security initiatives (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). Canada is therefore not only an Arctic state with territorial and strategic interests, but also a state whose Arctic policy must be understood in relation to Indigenous governance, rights and self-determination (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). Unlike many traditional security cases, Canadian Arctic strategy must also operate within a governance framework shaped by Indigenous rights, modern treaties and commitments to reconciliation. It also concerns the political legitimacy of Canadian strategy in a region where Inuit rights, Inuit knowledge and Indigenous governance are central to policy-making. Recent Inuit policy work has made this connection even more explicit by arguing that Canadian Arctic sovereignty and security must be grounded in Inuit-led governance rather than treating Inuit only as local stakeholders within a state-defined agenda (ITK, 2025).

At the same time, Canada is exposed to a changing geopolitical environment. Russia's expanded military infrastructure in the Arctic and China's growing economic and strategic engagement in the region have contributed to renewed geopolitical attention on the High North (Global Affairs Canada, 2024). These dynamics raise important questions about how Canada balances cooperation, deterrence and partnership in an increasingly contested region. For Canada, this is not just a matter of observing regional change from a distance. It affects defence planning, alliance commitments and diplomatic positioning directly (Global Affairs Canada, 2024; Government of Canada, 2024). Canada's recent defence and foreign policy documents show that Arctic change is now linked more explicitly to sovereignty protection, continental defence, NORAD modernization and international engagement through the region (Global Affairs Canada, 2024; Government of Canada, 2024).

It is for this reason that the changing Arctic security environment matters to Canada in a particularly concentrated way. It combines physical transformation, sovereignty concerns, alliance commitments, foreign presence and Indigenous governance obligations within one policy setting. The following chapter therefore examines how these environmental, geopolitical and governance pressures are reflected in Canada's evolving Arctic security strategy.

6. Canada's Evolving Arctic Security Strategy

6.1 Climate Change in Canadian Security Strategy

Climate change occupies an increasingly important place within Canadian Arctic security strategy because it alters the physical and strategic conditions under which sovereignty, surveillance and defence are exercised. Canadian policy documents consistently frame climate change as a factor that is reshaping the Arctic environment and generating new security challenges for the Canadian state (Government of Canada, 2024; Royal Canadian Navy, 2023).

In Canadian policy, climate change is not treated only as an environmental development. It increasingly appears as a security issue because it alters the operating environment in which sovereignty, surveillance, access and defence must be managed. This is clearest in *Our North, Strong and Free*, where climate change is presented under the heading “Climate Change and its Destabilizing Impacts on our Arctic and North” and described as affecting the foundations of Canadian security and prosperity (Government of Canada, 2024). The document states that Canada's Arctic is warming at four times the global average and that this is opening the region to the world in ways that were previously constrained by year-round ice cover (Government of Canada, 2024). This is significant because the document moves climate change

from the category of environmental concern into the category of strategic concern. By framing climate change in terms of security and national resilience, Canadian policy elevates environmental transformation beyond a scientific or ecological issue and incorporates it into strategic planning.

At the same time, climate change is often framed less as a single isolated threat than as a threat multiplier. Canadian policy repeatedly links climate change to increased accessibility, greater human activity, pressure on infrastructure and growing surveillance demands. The Royal Canadian Navy's Arctic and Northern Strategic Framework states that the Arctic strategic and operational environment is rapidly changing due to climate change, technological advancement and strategic competition, and that the region is becoming progressively more accessible as a result (Royal Canadian Navy, 2023). The same document argues that Canada can no longer rely solely on geography to safeguard its interests in the region (Royal Canadian Navy, 2023). This reflects a classic threat-multiplier framing. Climate change is not always presented as a hostile actor in itself, but as the factor that makes other risks more likely, more intense and more difficult to manage. By opening routes, increasing activity and exposing infrastructure, it amplifies sovereignty concerns, surveillance pressures and the relevance of foreign presence.

This threat-multiplier logic is also visible in the way climate change is linked to operational and infrastructural demands. The official Evaluation of Arctic Operations by the Department of National Defence states that climate change is one of the greatest threats facing the Arctic and that it is likely to act as a threat multiplier affecting Arctic operational capacity in several ways (Department of National Defence, 2024). The evaluation notes that climate change can generate more requests for assistance in response to natural disasters and that thawing permafrost threatens infrastructure such as airfields (Department of National Defence, 2024). This is important because it moves climate change from the level of broad strategic language to the level of concrete operational problems. It suggests that climate change is not only changing how the Arctic is perceived, but also how the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) can function in the region.

The same pattern appears in relation to surveillance and domain awareness. As climate change makes Arctic waters more accessible and vessel traffic more likely to increase, surveillance becomes more central to security policy. The Office of the Auditor General's report on Arctic waters surveillance concluded that the federal organizations audited had not taken the action required to build the maritime domain awareness needed to respond to safety and security risks associated with increasing vessel traffic in Arctic waters, and that existing satellite services and infrastructure did not provide the capacity needed for adequate surveillance (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2022). This matters for the present thesis because it shows one of the most concrete ways in which climate change becomes a security issue. It changes the volume and complexity of activity in the region, which in turn justifies increased attention to monitoring, sensing, control and state presence.

Climate change also appears in Canadian Arctic policy as a justification for increased presence in the North. The Department of National Defence's Evaluation of Arctic Operations explains that Canada's 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, commits the Canadian Armed Forces to enhance Arctic capability, increase mobility, reach and presence in the Arctic over the long term, and adapt to a changing security environment (Department of National Defence, 2024). The Royal Canadian Navy framework, drawing on the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF), likewise identifies objectives that include enhancing Canada's military presence in the Arctic, strengthening domain awareness, surveillance and control capabilities, and increasing emergency management capacities in Arctic and northern communities (Royal Canadian Navy, 2023). This means that climate change does not only justify rhetorical concern. It is linked to practical arguments for stronger presence, more surveillance, greater operational capability and better preparedness. Together, these documents show that climate change is not only acknowledged as a changing condition in the Arctic, but is also used to justify greater Canadian presence, surveillance capacity and operational readiness in the North (Department of National Defence, 2024; Royal Canadian Navy, 2023).

For Canada, the security significance of climate change is therefore threefold. First, climate change is framed directly as a destabilizing force affecting the Arctic and North. Second, it is framed as a threat multiplier that increases accessibility, foreign presence, infrastructure strain and sovereignty pressure. Third, it is used to justify increased surveillance, presence and operational adaptation in the North. Climate change is not always described in Canadian policy as a threat in the same way as Russia or other foreign actors. More often, it appears as the enabling condition that reshapes the Arctic security environment and makes other threats more pressing. This is precisely why it has become such an important part of Canada's Arctic security strategy.

In this way, climate change is no longer treated only as an environmental issue. It is increasingly incorporated into Canadian security thinking because it changes the conditions under which sovereignty can be asserted, infrastructure must be maintained, surveillance must be expanded and strategic presence must be justified. As a result, climate change has become a foundational element of Canadian Arctic security strategy, shaping both how threats are understood and how strategic responses are justified.

6.2 Russia and China in Canadian security narratives

At the same time, Russia's expanded military infrastructure in the Arctic and China's growing economic and strategic engagement in the region have contributed to renewed geopolitical attention on the High North (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a; Government of Canada, 2024). These developments have contributed to a shift in how the Arctic is understood within Canadian policy, from a relatively cooperative region to one of increasing strategic importance (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a; Government of Canada, 2024). China has identified itself as a "Near-Arctic State", which has placed it in the Arctic debate and given its Arctic engagement a more explicit diplomatic and strategic profile (The People's Republic of China, 2018). These dynamics raise important questions about how Canada balances

cooperation, deterrence and partnership in an increasingly contested region (Global Affairs Canada, 2024).

Recent Canadian strategy documents do not frame Russia and China in identical terms (Government of Canada, 2024a; Lanteigne, 2024). Instead, they are represented through different security registers, and those differences matter for how policy responses are justified. Russia tends to appear in more immediate military and defence-oriented language, while China is more often framed as a long-term strategic, political and economic challenge whose growing Arctic role could alter the regional balance over time (Government of Canada, 2024a; Lanteigne, 2024). This distinction does not mean that China is absent from Canadian Arctic security thinking, or that Russia is discussed only in military terms. Rather, it suggests that Canadian security narratives assign different kinds of risk to different foreign actors.

Russia is especially significant in this changing environment because militarization in the Arctic is not discussed only as a theoretical possibility, but as an ongoing strategic reality. In recent Canadian narratives, Russia is the foreign actor most directly associated with military threat, hard security and defence relevance (Government of Canada, 2024a; Global Affairs Canada, 2024a). *Our North, Strong and Free* links the Arctic to a broader global threat environment shaped by authoritarian powers and identifies the region as one where Canada must strengthen surveillance, deterrence and continental defence (Government of Canada, 2024a). The document treats the changing Arctic not as a distant peripheral issue, but as part of the strategic environment in which Canada must confront renewed military competition (Government of Canada, 2024a). Canada's 2024 defence update also states that Russian submarines are probing widely across the Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific Oceans, highlighting the underwater dimension of Arctic security and growing relevance of maritime surveillance and deterrence for Canada (Government of Canada, 2024a). This is important because it ties Russia not only to abstract geopolitical rivalry, but to concrete operational concerns such as undersea activity, early warning and continental defence.

Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy makes this framing even more explicit. It states that Russia is increasingly dependent on China and has reversed its historic posture by opening its Arctic to China, and it notes that in July 2024 Russia and China conducted joint military exercises in the Russian High North (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a). The language here is more than descriptive. It places Russia at the center of an emerging security environment in which Arctic affairs are increasingly connected to alliance politics, military posture and the defence of the North American Arctic. Qualitatively, Russia also appears in more direct and militarized language than China across recent Canadian defence and foreign policy documents. Where Russia is discussed, the associated vocabulary more often includes military infrastructure, submarines, exercises, deterrence, defence and surveillance (Government of Canada, 2024a; Global Affairs Canada, 2024a). This framing is significant because it helps justify increased defence spending, surveillance investments and military modernization in the Arctic (Government of Canada, 2024a).

China's role is different, but also significant. China's 2018 Arctic Policy presents China as a "Near-Arctic State" and explicitly links the Arctic to shipping routes, resource development, governance participation and long-term economic interests (The People's Republic of China, 2018). This self-positioning matters in Canadian narratives because it widens the strategic scope of the Arctic beyond the traditional Arctic states. In Canadian policy, China does not usually appear in the same immediate operational language as Russia. Instead, China is more often associated with long-term strategic competition, political influence, economic reach and the risk that non-Arctic powers may reshape the governance and balance of the region over time (Government of Canada, 2024a; Global Affairs Canada, 2024a). Our North, Strong and Free identifies China, along with Russia, as part of the challenge posed by authoritarian states and disruptive power to the international order (Government of Canada, 2024a). Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy goes further by stating that Russia and China are aligned in their desire to undermine the liberal rules-based international system, even while the asymmetry between them highlights divergent interests (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a).

The difference is not that China is framed as harmless. It is that China is less often represented as the immediate military problem and more often as the actor whose economic, political and diplomatic reach could make the Arctic more strategically crowded and more difficult for Canada to manage (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a; Lanteigne, 2024). This is consistent with China's own Arctic Policy, which stresses participation in shipping, resources, science and governance rather than presenting China as an Arctic military power (The People's Republic of China, 2018). Canadian narratives therefore tend to treat China as a challenger whose significance lies in long-term positioning, strategic access and influence, rather than in direct Arctic force projection (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a; The People's Republic of China, 2018).

These different framings matter for policy. When Russia is framed in military and strategic terms, the accompanying policy shift is toward increased surveillance, stronger deterrence, NORAD modernization, alliance coordination and a more robust defence posture in the North (Government of Canada, 2024a). Our North, Strong and Free connects Arctic change directly to continental defence, Arctic surveillance and Canada's role in NATO and NORAD (Government of Canada, 2024a). In this sense, Russia's framing is accompanied by policy language about readiness, infrastructure, sensing, domain awareness and presence (Government of Canada, 2024a). By contrast, when China is framed as a strategic or economic challenger, the accompanying response is more diplomatic and political (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a; Global Affairs Canada, 2024b). Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy emphasizes partnerships, diplomatic engagement, international coordination and a stronger Canadian presence in Arctic affairs in order to respond to new and emerging threats (Global Affairs Canada, 2024b). This does not exclude security concerns, but it places more emphasis on strategic positioning, governance and international alignment than on immediate military response (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a; Global Affairs Canada, 2024b).

Another important point is that Russia and China are increasingly framed together in Canadian policy, but not as identical threats (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a; Lanteigne & Lackenbauer, 2024). Their growing cooperation is treated as significant because it expands the scale of Arctic competition and suggests that Arctic security can no longer be understood only through traditional regional frameworks (Global Affairs Canada, 2024a). This distinction demonstrates that Canadian Arctic security strategy is not responding to foreign presence in a uniform way, but is differentiating between the types of risks associated with different actors (Lanteigne & Lackenbauer, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2024a).

Overall, the Canadian security narrative does not treat foreign actors in uniform ways. Russia is framed more directly as a military and strategic threat, while China appears more often as a long-term strategic, political and economic challenger. This distinction matters because different narratives justify different policy responses. Russia is linked more clearly to defence modernization, surveillance, deterrence and alliance commitments. China is linked more clearly to strategic vigilance, diplomatic positioning and concern about the widening geopolitical scope of Arctic affairs. Together, these framings show how Canadian Arctic security strategy responds not simply to foreign presence in general, but to differentiated understandings of what kinds of threats different foreign actors represent.

6.3 Indigenous rights and governance in strategy

Indigenous communities are not peripheral actors in this context, but are central stakeholders whose land, water and livelihoods are directly affected by both climate change and security initiatives (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). Canada is therefore not only an Arctic state with territorial and strategic interests, but also a state whose Arctic policy must be understood in relation to Indigenous governance, rights and self-determination (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). This makes Indigenous

governance an important part of Canadian Arctic security strategy, as it is embedded within both the policy environment and broader political framework of the region. This matters for security strategy because Arctic security is not only about defence and deterrence, but also about governance, legitimacy and the exercise of sovereignty, all of which are directly shaped by Indigenous presence, rights and political authority in the North (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). However, while Indigenous governance is formally recognized as central, its incorporation into security strategy does not always occur on equal terms. Instead, it often exists within a state-led framework that prioritizes sovereignty and national security objectives.

Within Canadian policy, Indigenous governance is frequently framed through the language of partnership, cooperation and inclusion. The Arctic and Northern Policy Framework emphasizes co-development and collaboration with Indigenous peoples, presenting northern governance as a shared process between the federal government and Indigenous communities (Government of Canada, 2019). This framing positions Indigenous actors as partners in Arctic governance and acknowledges their importance in shaping policy outcomes. Indigenous participation also occurs across multiple levels of Arctic governance, with organizations such as the Inuit Circumpolar Council operating internationally, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami representing Inuit interests nationally, and regional land claims organizations exercising governance responsibilities within Inuit Nunangat (Clarke, 2020). At the same time, this partnership language reflects a broader effort to align Indigenous governance with Canadian state objectives in the Arctic. Rather than presenting Indigenous actors as fully autonomous decision-makers, policy documents often integrate them into existing state-led strategic frameworks. This institutional inclusion is also reflected at the regional level, where Indigenous organizations participate as Permanent Participants in Arctic governance structures such as the Arctic Council, reinforcing their formal role in decision-making processes while still operating within a state-based system (Arctic Council Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat, 1999; Arctic Council, 2020).

This creates an important distinction between recognition and authority. Indigenous actors are clearly acknowledged as rights-holders within Canadian Arctic policy, particularly in relation to land claims, governance agreements and participation in decision-making processes (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). However, recognition as rights-holders does not always translate into equal influence over security strategy itself. In many cases, Indigenous governance appears as part of a collaborative process, rather than as a leading force in determining security priorities. This suggests that Indigenous actors are positioned simultaneously as rights-holders and partners, but not always as primary decision-makers in Arctic security strategy. This is consistent with broader analyses of Inuit governance structures, which show that Indigenous political organizations play a significant role in Arctic governance but often operate alongside, rather than above, state authority (Wilson, 2020).

Indigenous governance also plays a role in reinforcing Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic. The presence of Indigenous communities and the recognition of Indigenous governance structures contribute to Canada's claims over its northern territories (Government of Canada, 2019; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2026). In this sense, Indigenous inclusion is not only a matter of domestic policy, but also has international strategic significance. By demonstrating that the Arctic is inhabited, governed and politically organized, Canada strengthens its position in asserting sovereignty over regions such as the Northwest Passage. This creates a situation in which Indigenous governance contributes to the legitimacy of Canadian sovereignty claims, particularly in the context of increasing international attention and competition in the Arctic. The Canadian government has also emphasized the importance of Inuit Nanangat as a central component of its northern policy framework, further linking Indigenous presence to national sovereignty and governance (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2026).

This dynamic introduces a more instrumental dimension to Indigenous inclusion. Indigenous governance is not only incorporated because of legal or ethical commitments, but also because it supports broader strategic objectives related to territorial control and international positioning. In this sense, Indigenous

actors may function, at least in part, as sources of legitimacy within Canadian Arctic security discourse. Their inclusion helps demonstrate effective governance, continuous presence and political authority in the region, all of which are important for reinforcing sovereignty in an increasingly contested Arctic environment (Government of Canada, 2019; Global Affairs Canada, 2024).

At the same time, Indigenous organizations themselves articulate a different understanding of governance and security. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami argues that sovereignty and sovereign rights require healthy and sustainable communities across Inuit Nunangat and that Inuit must be equal partners in Arctic governance and international relations (ITK, 2019). More recent Inuit policy work has gone further by emphasizing that Arctic security and defence policy must be grounded in Inuit rights, Inuit knowledge and Inuit-led governance, rather than treating Inuit only as local stakeholders within a state-defined framework (ITK, 2025). Similarly, the Inuit Circumpolar Council has developed its own Inuit Arctic Policy, which asserts Inuit authority over Arctic governance and emphasizes self-determination, environmental stewardship and community-based approaches to security (ICC, 2020). These perspectives challenge the limits of state-led partnership models by emphasizing self-determination rather than participation alone.

This creates a clear tension between state and Indigenous understandings of governance. On one hand, Canadian policy presents Indigenous actors as partners within a shared governance framework. On the other hand, Indigenous organizations emphasize leadership, autonomy and decision-making authority. The difference between these positions is significant because it highlights a gap between inclusion and control. While Indigenous governance is recognized and incorporated into policy, it is not always centered in a way that allows Indigenous actors to define security priorities independently of the state (ITK, 2025; ICC, 2020).

This tension is also visible in how security is defined. Canadian Arctic security strategy often focuses on sovereignty, territorial control, surveillance and defence capabilities (Government of Canada, 2024;

Government of Canada, 2017). Within this framework, Indigenous governance is sometimes connected to these priorities rather than treated as a separate or equally important dimension of security. For example, Indigenous participation may be linked to improving local knowledge, strengthening community resilience or supporting emergency response. While these are important contributions, they are often framed in ways that align with state security objectives. As a result, Indigenous governance can become integrated into security strategy in a supportive role, rather than shaping the overall direction of that strategy.

At the same time, Indigenous perspectives often emphasize broader understandings of security that include community wellbeing, environmental sustainability and cultural continuity (ICC, 2020; ITK, 2019). These perspectives do not always align with state-centered security priorities, particularly when those priorities focus on defence, deterrence and geopolitical competition. This difference in perspective reinforces the idea that Indigenous governance is not simply an additional component of Arctic security strategy, but a distinct approach to security that may not always be fully reflected in state policy. Indigenous governance therefore becomes part of Arctic security strategy not only because of legal and political obligations, but because it influences sovereignty, legitimacy, policy implementation and competing understandings of what security in the Arctic should entail.

Overall, Indigenous governance is clearly present within Canadian Arctic security strategy, but its role is complex and at times contradictory. Indigenous actors are recognized as rights-holders and are increasingly included as partners in governance processes (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). However, they may also function as sources of legitimacy for Canadian sovereignty and as contributors to state-defined security objectives (Government of Canada, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2024). At the same time, Indigenous organizations continue to advocate for greater autonomy, leadership and self-determination in Arctic governance (ITK, 2025; ICC, 2020).

This all suggests that Indigenous governance in Canadian Arctic security strategy exists across three overlapping roles: as rights-holders with recognized legal and political status, as partners within state-led policy frameworks, and at times as instruments that support broader sovereignty and security objectives. The interaction between these roles creates ongoing tension between inclusion and control, partnership and autonomy, and state security priorities and Indigenous self-determination. Understanding this tension is essential for analyzing how Canadian Arctic security strategy is constructed and how it responds to the broader political and governance realities of the North.

6.4 Strategic adaptation over time

Canada's Arctic security strategy has evolved significantly over time, not only in how it defines threats, but in the kinds of tools, priorities and policy responses it emphasizes. Earlier approaches to Arctic security were shaped by a relatively stable and cooperative regional environment, where geographic isolation and limited accessibility reduced the perception of immediate threat (Jacobsen, 2013; Arctic Council, 2009). However, as climate change, geopolitical competition and increased international activity have reshaped the Arctic, Canadian strategy has adapted in response (Heininen et al., 2020; Østhagen, 2021). This evolution reflects not only changing material conditions, but also a shift in how those conditions are interpreted and framed as matters of national security (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995).

In earlier policy frameworks, particularly Strong, Secure, Engaged, Arctic security was characterized by relatively low urgency (Government of Canada, 2017). The Arctic was still largely insulated by ice, and limited accessibility reduced the level of activity in the region (Arctic Council, 2009). As a result, Canada's approach focuses on maintaining presence and asserting sovereignty in a stable environment rather than responding to immediate threats (Government of Canada, 2017). The emphasis was on stewardship, cooperation and long-term capability development rather than rapid militarization or

deterrence. This lower sense of urgency was shaped by both physical and political conditions, as the Arctic was widely understood as a region of cooperation rather than competition (Jacobsen, 2013). Limited foreign activity and the absence of direct military pressure meant that security concerns did not require the same level of operational readiness or investment that is seen in more recent policy (Jacobsen, 2013; Dodds, 2010).

By the time of the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, Canadian Arctic strategy had begun to shift toward a broader understanding of security (Government of Canada, 2019). Climate change was increasingly recognized as a central factor shaping the Arctic environment, with growing emphasis on accessibility, infrastructure challenges and the need for governance adaptation (Government of Canada, 2019). This period reflects a transitional phase in which Arctic security is no longer viewed solely through traditional military terms, but as a complex policy space that includes environmental change, governance and Indigenous participation. Indigenous rights and governance are emphasized more explicitly, and policy language highlights partnership, co-development and the importance of northern communities in shaping Arctic policy (Government of Canada, 2019). This represents an expansion of security beyond defence, incorporating governance, resilience and environmental change into the strategic framework and policies. However, while this period broadens the definition of security, it does not yet reflect the high level of urgency or militarized focus that becomes more visible in later documents.

More recent policy documents, particularly *Our North, Strong and Free* and *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*, demonstrate a clear shift toward a more urgent and security-driven Arctic strategy (Government of Canada, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2024). In these documents, the Arctic is no longer framed primarily as a peripheral or cooperative region, but as an increasingly contested strategic space. Russia is identified as a direct military threat, with emphasis on submarine activity, military infrastructure and expanded operational capabilities in the Arctic (Government of Canada, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2024). China is framed as a long-term strategic and economic challenger whose growing presence

expands the geopolitical scope of the region (Global Affairs Canada, 2024). This shift reflects a movement from potential or abstract risks to clearly defined and immediate security concerns. The increasing urgency reflects the fact that the Arctic is no longer insulated from global security dynamics, but is instead directly exposed to military activity, strategic competition and increased international presence (Østhagen, 2021; Government of Canada, 2024).

This increasing urgency is also visible in the types of policy responses emphasized in recent strategy. There is a stronger focus on surveillance, domain awareness, infrastructure development and operational readiness in the Arctic. Canada's defence update highlights investments in NORAD modernization, Arctic surveillance systems and expanded military capabilities designed to respond to a changing threat environment (Government of Canada, 2024). Rather than relying primarily on symbolic presence or long-term planning, Canadian strategy now emphasizes concrete operational tools and capabilities. This includes strengthening sensing technologies, improving mobility and enhancing the ability of the Canadian Armed Forces to operate effectively in Arctic conditions.

At the same time, Canada's Arctic strategy is increasingly shaped by alliance dynamics and collective security considerations. NATO has identified the Arctic and High North as regions of growing strategic importance, and in 2026 launched Arctic Sentry as a multi-domain military activity designed to strengthen deterrence and defence in the region (NATO, 2026a; NATO, 2026b). This development is significant because it situates the Arctic within a broader framework of collective defence, reinforcing the idea that Arctic security is no longer solely a national concern, but part of wider geopolitical competition. Canada's increasing alignment with NATO priorities further reflects the shift toward a more defence-oriented and coordinated security posture in the Arctic, illustrating how Arctic security is increasingly embedded within wider alliance frameworks (NATO, 2026a; NATO, 2026b).

Altogether, these developments show a clear transformation in Canadian Arctic security strategy over time. Earlier policy frameworks emphasized cooperation, stability and long-term stewardship in a relatively low risk environment. The transitional phase expanded the concept of security to include climate change, governance and Indigenous participation. More recent strategy reflects a heightened sense of urgency, driven by increased accessibility, foreign presence and geopolitical competition, and is characterized by stronger emphasis on defence, deterrence and operational capability. This shift is particularly visible in the evolution of strategic tools. Earlier policy frameworks emphasized presence and sovereignty assertion, while later strategies prioritize surveillance, domain awareness, defence infrastructure and deterrence capabilities, reflecting a move toward a more operational and security driven approach. At the same time, policy priorities shift from stewardship and cooperation toward risk management, threat response and strategic competition, indicating a reorientation of Arctic policy from long-term governance to immediate security concerns.

Taken together, these documents illustrate three distinct stages in the evolution of Canadian Arctic security strategy. *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (2017) provides a baseline characterized by sovereignty, presence and relatively low urgency. The *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (2019) broadens the concept of security by incorporating climate change, governance and Indigenous participation. Finally, *Our North, Strong and Free* and *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* (2024) reflect a more urgent and operationally focused approach shaped by geopolitical competition, deterrence and defence modernization.

Table 1

Evolution of Canadian Arctic Security Strategy

Period	Key Document	Dominant Security Focus	Main Strategic Tools

2017	Strong, Secure, Engaged	Sovereignty, presence, cooperation	Presence, long-term capability development
2019	Arctic and Northern Policy Framework	Climate change, governance, resilience, Indigenous partnership	Co-development, governance, adaptation
2024	Our North, Strong and Free	Deterrence, continental defence, Arctic security	Surveillance, NORAD modernization, operational readiness
2024	Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy	Geopolitical competition, Russia, China	Diplomacy, strategic positioning, international partnerships

These developments also occur within a broader alliance context, reflected in NATO's growing emphasis on Arctic security and initiatives such as Arctic Sentry (NATO, 2026a; NATO, 2026b). The table illustrates that strategic adaptation is visible not only in the threats identified by Canadian policy documents, but also in the evolution of the tools and priorities used to respond to those threats.

From a theoretical perspective, this shift reflects the interaction between structural change and securitization. Climate change, increased accessibility and geopolitical competition represent structural transformations that alter the Arctic security environment (Waltz, 1979; Little, 2007). At the same time, these developments are framed in political discourse as threats to sovereignty, territorial control and national security, which elevates their importance within policy (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Canadian Arctic strategy therefore evolves not just because the environment changes, but because those changes are interpreted, prioritized and translated into concrete strategic responses. Following Clausewitz, these strategic responses can also be understood as political choices designed to protect broader state objectives, including sovereignty, governance and continental defence (von Clausewitz, 1832/2006). This demonstrates that Canadian Arctic security strategy evolves through the interaction of changing structural

conditions and the political framing of those conditions as urgent security threats, resulting in shifts not only in discourse but in concrete strategic practice.

Overall, Canada's Arctic security strategy has moved from a relatively low urgency cooperation focused approach to a more active, security driven and operationally focused strategy. This transformation reflects a broader shift in how the Arctic is understood, from a remote and stable region to a central place of strategic importance shaped by climate change, geopolitical rivalry and evolving governance challenges (Heininen et al., 2020; Østhagen, 2021).

6.5 Discussion

The analysis presented in this chapter shows that Canada's Arctic security strategy has evolved in response to a changing regional environment shaped by climate change, increased accessibility and growing geopolitical competition (Arctic Council, 2009; Heininen et al., 2020; Østhagen, 2021).

However, these developments alone do not fully explain how Canadian strategy has changed. The most convincing explanation is the interaction between material transformation in the Arctic and the way these changes are interpreted and framed as security threats within Canadian policy and political discourse (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). This reflects the combined analytical framework outlined in Chapter 2, where structural change explains why the environment shifts, while securitization theory explains how those shifts are translated into strategic priorities (Waltz, 1979; Buzan et al., 1998).

From a structural perspective, the Arctic security environment has undergone significant transformation. Climate change has altered the physical geography of the region by reducing sea ice, increasing navigability and making Arctic waters more accessible to commercial, political and military activity (Arctic Council, 2009; Heininen et al., 2020). At the same time, geopolitical developments, particularly

Russia's military expansion and China's growing strategic interest, have increased the strategic relevance of the Arctic (Østhagen, 2021; Government of Canada, 2024). These changes reflect broader shifts in the international system, including evolving power dynamics, technological developments and the growing importance of previously peripheral regions (Waltz, 1979; Little, 2007). In this sense, the Arctic is no longer insulated from global security dynamics, but is increasingly integrated into them (Østhagen, 2021). This supports the argument advanced by structural realism that changes in the distribution of capabilities and geographic conditions reshape the strategic environment and create new pressures for state adaptation (Waltz, 1979; Little, 2007).

At the same time, structural change alone does not fully explain Canadian Arctic security strategy. While environmental transformation and geopolitical competition create the conditions for strategic adaptation, they do not determine how those conditions are interpreted or prioritized (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). This is where securitization theory provides a necessary second layer of explanation. As discussed in Chapter 2, securitization theory argues that issues become security concerns when they are framed as existential threats to valued referent objects such as sovereignty, territorial integrity or national stability (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). In the Canadian case, climate change, foreign presence and Arctic accessibility do not automatically function as security threats. Rather, they become security issues through political framing in official documents and discourse (Government of Canada, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2024).

This is clearly visible in the analysis. The findings suggest that securitization occurs through a process in which environmental and geopolitical developments are first identified as challenges, then linked to referent objects such as sovereignty, territorial control and national security, and finally used to justify strategic responses. In the Canadian case, sovereignty emerges as the primary referent object, with climate change, foreign activity and increasing accessibility framed as developments that may undermine Canada's ability to exercise authority, control and security in the Arctic. This suggests that sovereignty

functions as the central causal link between environmental and geopolitical change on the one hand and strategic adaptation on the other, since developments become security concerns when they are perceived as affecting Canada's ability to exercise authority and control in the Arctic. Climate change becomes a security concern not simply because temperatures rise, but because increased accessibility is connected to questions of sovereignty, surveillance and operational capacity. Similarly, Russia and China become security concerns not merely because they are present in the Arctic, but because official policy documents frame their activities as threats to Canadian interests and regional stability.

Climate change is not presented only as an environmental issue, but as a destabilizing factor and threat multiplier that affects sovereignty, infrastructure and operational capacity (Government of Canada, 2024; Department of National Defence, 2024). This assessment is reinforced by Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme findings showing that climate change is affecting transportation systems, critical infrastructure, food security, livelihoods and the safety of Arctic communities, particularly Indigenous communities, while simultaneously increasing accessibility, shipping activity and economic opportunities in the region (AMAP, 2021). Similarly, Russia is framed as a direct military threat, while China is presented as a long-term strategic challenger whose presence expands the scope of Arctic competition (Government of Canada, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2024). These framings elevate specific developments into matters of security and justify corresponding policy responses, including increased surveillance, defence modernization and greater operational presence in the Arctic (Government of Canada, 2024; Royal Canadian Navy, 2023). This demonstrates the core insight of securitization theory: that security is not simply a reflection of material conditions, but the result of how those conditions are constructed, communicated and accepted within political discourse (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995).

The findings also suggest that security strategy is best understood as a political process through which perceived threats are translated into coordinated policy responses. This understanding of strategy is consistent with broader scholarship that views national security strategy as a process of integrating domestic, foreign and military policies through coordinated institutional frameworks rather than as a single policy document (Ries, 2016). This perspective is further reinforced by recent Arctic scholarship that views strategy as emerging through the coordinated use of multiple policy instruments across political, economic, scientific and security domains rather than through a single policy mechanism (Puranen & Kopra, 2023). In the Canadian case, climate change, increased accessibility and geopolitical competition became increasingly linked to concerns about sovereignty, governance and national security. Strategic adaptation emerged as these concerns were reflected in defence planning, foreign policy priorities and Arctic governance frameworks across multiple policy documents.

When these two perspectives are considered together, a clearer explanation of Canadian Arctic strategy emerges. Structural change explains why the Arctic is becoming more accessible, more active and more strategically significant (Arctic Council, 2009; Østhagen, 2021). Securitization explains how these developments are interpreted as threats to sovereignty, national security and territorial control (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Canadian Arctic security strategy is therefore best understood as the outcome of this interaction, where changing material conditions create new pressures, and securitized political framing translates those pressures into concrete strategic responses. This interaction is what drives the shift from an earlier sovereignty and stewardship-oriented approach to a more active and security driven strategy (Government of Canada, 2017; Government of Canada, 2024). Following Clausewitz, these strategic responses can also be understood as political choices designed to protect broader state objectives, including sovereignty, governance and continental defence (von Clausewitz, 1832/2006).

The analysis also demonstrates that different actors are assigned distinct identities within Canadian policy discourse. Russia is constructed primarily as a military threat, China as a strategic and economic challenger, Indigenous organizations as governance partners and rights-holders, and Canada as both a sovereign Arctic state and a steward of northern governance. This finding is reinforced by scholarship demonstrating that Russia's own Arctic discourse frames security through concerns related to economic development, sovereignty protection and military vulnerability, particularly in relation to NATO activity and the changing Arctic environment (Borozna, 2024). This highlights how security threats are interpreted differently by different actors, supporting the core insight of securitization theory that security is shaped through political and strategic interpretation rather than objective conditions alone. Canada's identity is also reflected in its foreign policy discourse, where Arctic engagement is presented not only as a matter of defence and sovereignty, but also of governance, partnership and responsible stewardship. This broader understanding of security is consistent with Inuit perspectives that view Arctic security as encompassing environmental, social, cultural and economic dimensions alongside traditional military concerns (ICC, 2010). These identities shape how threats are interpreted and how policy responses are justified within Arctic security strategy.

These identities are closely linked to differing interests within the Arctic. Canadian policy emphasizes sovereignty, governance and security; Russia is associated with military power and strategic influence; China with long-term economic and geopolitical engagement; and Indigenous organizations with self-determination, community wellbeing and Inuit-led governance.

The analysis also highlights that strategic adaptation is not only about identifying new threats, but about redefining the tools and priorities used to respond to those threats. In practical terms, these strategic means include enhanced surveillance capabilities, defence modernization, Arctic infrastructure investments, NORAD modernization, increased operational presence and closer cooperation with allies and northern partners. As shown in the previous section, Canadian Arctic strategy has moved from

emphasizing presence and long-term stewardship toward prioritizing surveillance, deterrence, infrastructure and operational readiness (Government of Canada, 2017; Government of Canada, 2024). This shift reflects both the changing environment and the way that environment is framed as requiring more immediate and robust responses (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). In this sense, securitization does not only shape how threats are understood, but also influences the kinds of policy tools that are considered necessary and legitimate.

The Canadian case also demonstrates that strategic adaptation occurs within a constitutional framework that recognizes Indigenous rights and governance responsibilities. As a result, security strategy is shaped not only by external threats, but also by domestic legal and political obligations that influence how sovereignty and security can be pursued in the Arctic.

At the same time, the discussion of Indigenous governance adds an important additional dimension to this framework. While structural change and securitization explain much of Canada's strategic adaptation, Indigenous governance introduces questions of legitimacy, authority and alternative understandings of security (ITK, 2019; ICC, 2020). Indigenous actors are incorporated into Canadian Arctic strategy as rights holders and partners, but their role is not always equal in shaping security priorities (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). This suggests that securitization processes are not neutral, but may privilege certain types of security concerns, particularly those related to sovereignty and state interests, over others such as community wellbeing and self-determination (Padrtova, 2019; Greaves, 2016). As a result, the interaction between structural change and securitization also involves questions of whose security is prioritized and how different forms of governance are incorporated into strategy.

Overall, the findings support the combined analytical framework developed in Chapter 2, showing that structural change and securitization together provide the most convincing explanation for Canadian Arctic

strategic adaptation. This combined explanation helps bridge the gap between structural approaches, which explain why the Arctic is changing, and discourse-based approaches, which explain how those changes become meaningful within policy (Jacobsen, 2013; Padrtova, 2019). In doing so, it provides a more complete understanding of how Canada adapts its Arctic security strategy in response to a rapidly transforming region.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Answering the Research Question

This thesis asked: How is Canada adapting its Arctic security strategy in response to climate change, increasing international competition, regional militarization, and how are Indigenous rights and governance framed within this process?

Canada is adapting its Arctic security strategy by shifting from a relatively low urgency cooperation focused approach toward a more active, security driven and operationally focused strategy. A key finding of this thesis is that Canada's Arctic security strategy is not contained within a single dedicated strategy document. Rather, it emerges across multiple defence, foreign policy and Arctic governance documents that collectively define Canada's approach to Arctic security. Together, these documents form a network of interconnected policy frameworks through which Canadian Arctic security policy is articulated and adapted over time. The analysis demonstrates that this adaptation is driven by the interaction of three key dynamics: climate change, geopolitical competition and Indigenous governance.

The absence of a single dedicated Arctic security strategy document appears to reflect the multidimensional nature of Arctic governance in Canada. Arctic security is not treated solely as a defence issue, but intersects with foreign policy, climate change, Indigenous governance, sovereignty, infrastructure and northern development. As a result, strategic priorities are distributed across multiple policy frameworks rather than consolidated within a single document. The findings suggest that Canadian Arctic security strategy is therefore best understood as a distributed strategic framework rather than a single policy document. This also reflects the decentralized nature of Arctic governance in Canada, where responsibility for Arctic security is distributed across defence, foreign policy, Indigenous governance and northern development institutions rather than concentrated within a single policy authority.

This finding also challenges a more conventional understanding of Arctic security as primarily a military or defence issue. The analysis suggests that Canadian Arctic security strategy is shaped not only by defence and geopolitical concerns, but also by climate change, Indigenous governance and broader questions of sovereignty and legitimacy. As a result, Arctic security emerges as a multidimensional policy area that extends beyond traditional understandings of national defence.

Earlier policy frameworks emphasized stability, stewardship and long-term presence in a region that was largely insulated by ice and understood as cooperative (Government of Canada, 2017; Jacobsen, 2013). This approach is reflected in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (2017), which prioritized sovereignty, presence and long-term capability development in the Arctic. The Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (2019) broadened the concept of security by incorporating climate change, governance and Indigenous participation into discussions of Arctic policy and resilience. However, as the Arctic has become more accessible due to climate change and more strategically significant due to geopolitical competition, Canadian strategy has evolved to reflect these changing conditions (Arctic Council, 2009; Østhagen,

2021). By 2024, *Our North, Strong and Free* and Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy reflected a more urgent and operationally focused approach characterized by deterrence, surveillance, defence modernization and responses to geopolitical competition. This shift is visible not only in the identification of new threats, but in the increasing emphasis on surveillance, deterrence, infrastructure developments and defence capabilities in the Arctic (Government of Canada, 2024).

Climate change plays a central role in this adaptation. It is increasingly framed in Canadian policy not only as an environmental issue, but as a threat multiplier that alters the physical and strategic environment of the Arctic (Government of Canada, 2024; Department of National Defence, 2024). By increasing accessibility, climate change enables greater human activity, foreign presence and pressure on infrastructure, which in turn requires greater monitoring, preparedness and operational capacity (Arctic Council, 2009). In this sense, climate change functions as the underlying condition that reshapes the Arctic security environment and makes other threats more significant (Heininen et al., 2020).

At the same time, international competition has become more central to Canadian Arctic strategy. Russia is framed as a direct military threat, particularly through its expanded military infrastructure and submarine activity, while China is presented as a long-term strategic and economic challenger whose growing presence increases the geopolitical complexity of the region (Government of Canada, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2024). These developments contribute to a shift in how the Arctic is understood, from a peripheral and cooperative space to one of increasing strategic importance (Østhagen, 2021). As a result, Canadian policy increasingly emphasizes deterrence, alliance cooperation, and defence modernization, including stronger alignment with NATO and NORAD commitments (Government of Canada, 2024; NATO, 2026a).

Indigenous rights and governance are incorporated into Canadian Arctic security strategy, but not always on equal terms. Indigenous actors are recognized as rights holders and are increasingly included as

partners in governance processes, particularly through co-development frameworks and institutional participation (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). However, Indigenous governance is also sometimes positioned within state led security frameworks that prioritize sovereignty and national security objectives. This creates a tension between Indigenous self-determination and state security priorities, where Indigenous governance contributes to the legitimacy of Canadian sovereignty while not always shaping security strategy independently (ITK, 2025; ICC, 2020). The findings also suggest that Canadian Arctic security strategy develops within a constitutional framework that recognizes Indigenous rights and governance obligations, meaning that strategic adaptation is shaped by both external pressures and domestic political commitments.

Canada's Arctic security strategy is adapting through the interaction of environmental change, geopolitical competition and evolving governance dynamics. The key finding is that these factors do not operate independently, but together shape how threats are understood and how strategy is developed (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). The findings suggest that this adaptation occurs through a process in which environmental and geopolitical developments are linked to concerns about sovereignty, governance and national security, and are subsequently translated into strategic responses through defence, foreign policy and Arctic governance frameworks. In this sense, adaptation is driven not only by changing Arctic conditions, but also by the way those conditions are interpreted and prioritized within Canadian policy discourse. Canada's response therefore reflects both the material transformation of the Arctic and the way these changes are framed as security concerns, resulting in a more active and security oriented approach to the region.

7.2 Key Insights

This thesis identifies four main findings regarding how Canada is adapting its Arctic security strategy in response to climate change, geopolitical competition and evolving governance dynamics.

First, climate change has been incorporated into Canadian Arctic security strategy as a central enabling condition and threat multiplier, rather than as a standalone environmental issue. The analysis shows that climate change is consistently linked to increased accessibility, growing human activity, infrastructure strain and the need for enhanced surveillance and operational capacity (Government of Canada, 2024; Department of National Defence, 2024). As a result, climate change is not treated only as an ecological concern, but as a factor that reshapes the entire Arctic security environment and intensifies other risks (Heininen et al., 2020). This finding demonstrates that environmental transformation functions as the foundation upon which other Arctic security concerns emerge, shaping how Canadian security priorities are defined and justified.

Second, Canadian security narratives differentiate between foreign actors, particularly Russia and China, and assign them distinct roles within Arctic strategy. Russia is framed primarily as an immediate military and strategic threat, associated with defence, deterrence and surveillance concerns. In contrast, China is presented as a long-term strategic and economic challenger whose growing presence expands the geopolitical scope of the Arctic (Government of Canada, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2024). This distinction matters because it shapes the types of policy responses adopted, with Russia linked to defence modernization and operational readiness, while China is more closely associated with diplomatic positioning and strategic vigilance. Recent research similarly suggests that Russia and China pursue distinct Arctic objectives, with Russia prioritizing military security, territorial control and resource development, while China focuses more heavily on economic access, scientific presence and long-term strategic influence (Schalin & Arts, 2026). More broadly, the analysis demonstrates that Canadian policy assigns distinct identities to key actors, shaping how threats are interpreted and how policy responses are justified within Arctic security strategy.

Third, Indigenous governance is incorporated into Canadian Arctic security strategy, but not always on equal terms. Indigenous actors are recognized as rights holders and are increasingly included as partners in governance processes (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). However, the analysis shows that Indigenous governance is often positioned within state led frameworks that prioritize sovereignty and national security objectives. This creates a tension between inclusion and autonomy, where Indigenous participation contributes to the legitimacy of Canadian sovereignty but does not always translate into equal influence over security priorities (ITK, 2025; ICC, 2020).

Fourth, Canadian Arctic security strategy emerges through a distributed network of defence, foreign policy and Arctic governance frameworks rather than through a single dedicated strategy document. Within this distributed framework, Canadian Arctic strategy has evolved from a low urgency, cooperation focused approach toward a more active, security driven and operationally focused strategy (Government of Canada, 2017; Government of Canada, 2024). Earlier policy frameworks emphasized stability, stewardship and presence, while more recent strategies prioritize surveillance, deterrence, infrastructure and defence capabilities. This shift reflects both changing material conditions and the increasing securitization of Arctic developments, resulting in a more urgent and strategically focused approach to the region (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995).

Together, these findings show that Canada's Arctic security strategy is shaped by the interaction between environmental change, geopolitical competition and evolving governance dynamics, rather than by any single factor alone (Waltz, 1979; Buzan et al., 1998). The findings further demonstrate that Arctic security encompasses both traditional concerns related to sovereignty, deterrence and defence, as well as broader issues relating to governance, infrastructure, climate resilience and the well-being of northern communities (Government of Canada, 2019; ITK, 2019). Strategic adaptation occurs as these

developments are increasingly interpreted as challenges to Canadian sovereignty, security and governance, resulting in changing priorities, threat perceptions and policy responses over time.

7.3 Contribution

This thesis contributes to the existing literature on Arctic security, securitization and international relations in four main ways.

First, it connects environmental change, geopolitical competition and Indigenous governance within a single analytical framework. Much of the existing literature tends to examine these dynamics separately, with some studies focusing on climate change and environmental transformation, others on geopolitical rivalry, and others on Indigenous governance and Arctic politics. By bringing these elements together, this thesis shows that Canadian Arctic security strategy is shaped by the interaction between these factors, rather than by any one of them in isolation. This integrated approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Arctic security is constructed and how multiple pressures operate simultaneously within a single policy environment.

Second, this thesis helps bridge the gap between securitization theory and concrete security strategy. Existing scholarship has been effective at identifying how Arctic issues are framed as security concerns, particularly through discourse and narrative analysis. However, fewer studies trace how these securitized framings are translated into actual policy priorities, defence planning and strategic adaptation. By analyzing Canadian policy documents and linking security narratives directly to strategic outcomes, this thesis demonstrates how discourse moves beyond rhetoric and becomes embedded in state strategy.

Third, this thesis demonstrates that Canadian Arctic security policy operates through multiple interconnected policy frameworks rather than a single unified strategy. These defence, foreign policy and governance frameworks collectively define Canada's approach to Arctic security. While previous research has noted that Canadian Arctic threat perceptions and security priorities are dispersed across multiple policy documents (Lackenbauer & Sergunin, 2022), this thesis extends that observation by demonstrating how these interconnected frameworks collectively function as a distributed security strategy. This finding is also consistent with broader scholarship suggesting that Arctic strategy is often expressed through coordinated political, economic, governance and security instruments rather than through a single strategy document (Puranen & Kopra, 2023). This finding highlights how strategic adaptation occurs through evolving priorities, threat perceptions and policy tools across different policy domains, rather than through the replacement of one unified Arctic security strategy.

Fourth, this thesis contributes to the literature by foregrounding Indigenous governance as a central component of Arctic security strategy, rather than treating it as a secondary or separate issue. While Indigenous participation is widely acknowledged in Arctic governance, it is less consistently integrated into security analysis. This study shows that Indigenous governance plays multiple roles within Canadian Arctic strategy, as a source of legitimacy, a framework for partnership and a site of tension between state priorities and self-determination. This highlights the importance of considering whose security is prioritized and how different governance perspectives are incorporated into strategic decision making.

Overall, this thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Arctic security by showing that strategy is shaped not only by material change, but by the interaction between environmental transformation, geopolitical dynamics, Indigenous governance and the political construction of threat. In doing so, it demonstrates how strategic adaptation emerges when changing Arctic conditions are interpreted, prioritized and translated into policy across a distributed network of defence, foreign policy and governance frameworks.

7.4 Limitations and future research

This thesis has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study relies primarily on qualitative document analysis of publicly available policy documents and official communications. While this approach makes it possible to examine how Arctic security is framed and articulated, it does not provide direct insight into internal decision-making processes or informal policy negotiations. As a result, the analysis focuses on how strategy is presented and justified, rather than how it is developed behind the scenes.

Second, the thesis concentrates on strategic framing and policy articulation rather than on implementation or effectiveness. It does not assess whether Canadian Arctic security policies are successfully carried out in practice, or whether existing capabilities are sufficient to meet the challenges identified in official documents. This means that there may be a gap between the strategic priorities outlined in policy and actual capacity to achieve them.

Third, the single case study design limits the ability to generalize findings beyond the Canadian context. While Canada provides a particularly valuable case due to the intersection of climate change, geopolitical competition and Indigenous governance, the findings are not intended to apply uniformly to other Arctic states. Comparative research would be needed to determine whether similar patterns exist elsewhere in the region.

Finally, while this thesis incorporates Indigenous governance as a central analytical category, it remains primarily based on state-produced documents and selected Indigenous policy sources. This means that Indigenous perspectives are included, but not fully captured in their diversity or depth. Future research

could expand this dimension by incorporating interviews, community-based research or a broader range of Indigenous voices.

Future research could build on this study in several ways. Comparative analyses across Arctic states could help identify whether the interaction between structural change and securitization observed in Canada is present elsewhere. In addition, further research could examine how Arctic security strategies are implemented in practice, particularly in relation to infrastructure, emergency preparedness and community resilience. Finally, more in-depth engagement with Indigenous perspectives would provide a stronger understanding of how alternative approaches to security and governance shape Arctic policy and influence the future development of Arctic security strategy.

The Arctic is no longer a peripheral region in Canadian security policy. Climate change, geopolitical competition and evolving Indigenous governance have transformed the strategic environment and reshaped how Canada understands and pursues security in the North through an increasingly interconnected network of defence, foreign policy and governance frameworks. By examining the interaction between structural change, securitization and political objectives, this thesis demonstrates that Canadian Arctic security strategy emerges through a distributed network of defence, foreign policy and governance frameworks rather than through a single strategy document. Understanding this evolution is essential for assessing how Canada will navigate the environmental, geopolitical and governance challenges that are likely to shape the future of the Arctic.

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