

## Canada's Arctic in the geopolitical spotlight: USA vs. China

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**The Canadian Arctic is becoming a geopolitical hotspot where the USA and China are seeking to gain influence using different strategies. While Washington is focusing on military cooperation and pressure, Beijing is pursuing a subtle strategy of research, investment, and normative self-positioning. For Canada, this means growing dependence in terms of security policy and the danger of creeping influence—with direct consequences for sovereignty and indigenous communities in the north.**

*Ms. Pauline Springer, September 2025*

### **Canada's north between the protective power of the US and the influence of China**

The Canadian Arctic is becoming a testing ground for international power politics. While the US wants to guarantee Canada's security as an ally, China is using research and investment to gradually gain influence. This creates a double tension: military dependence on Washington on the one hand, and the danger of covert infiltration by Beijing on the other – with consequences for sovereignty and indigenous communities.

The Arctic is no longer a forgotten, snow-covered edge of the world map. With climate change, melting sea ice, and easier access to raw materials and trade routes, the region has gained new geopolitical significance. For Canada, the North is not only an ecologically sensitive area and habitat for indigenous communities, but also a geopolitical playing field where the interests of major powers intersect. The United States and China in particular have increased their presence in the Canadian Arctic—albeit in very different ways.

This article examines how both countries are attempting to gain influence in Canada's north, what strategies they are pursuing, and what consequences this has for Canada.

### **The USA: Focus on continental defense**

Canada and the United States share a long history of security cooperation in the far north. Even during the Cold War, the Arctic was recognized as a strategically crucial zone. Institutions such as the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) are an expression of this close military cooperation. The 1988 Agreement on Arctic Cooperation also made it clear that Washington respects Canada's claim to sovereignty, but at the same time institutionalized its own military presence.

For the US, the Canadian Arctic is not a distant periphery, but a potential Achilles' heel. Should a conflict arise with Russia or China, missiles could threaten the American heartland via the polar region. US strategists therefore regard the Arctic as North America's northern flank – a formulation that makes it clear that security in this area is directly linked to the security of the entire United States. The result is constant pressure on Canada. Washington regularly calls on Ottawa to invest

more in defense and infrastructure in the north. Critics in the US complain that Canada is not fulfilling its role in the alliance. This criticism is not just rhetorical: the modernization of the outdated North Warning System radar chain, which dates back to the Cold War, has been stalling for years. Without American investment, surveillance of Arctic airspace would be virtually impossible.

This power imbalance clearly shows that although Canada formally retains its sovereignty, in practice its own defense strategy is closely linked to Washington's needs. If Ottawa fails to deliver, the US could threaten to act without Canada's consent in an emergency. This highlights how strongly the Canadian Arctic is influenced by American security interests.

### **China: Research, investment, and quiet presence**

While the US argues openly about military and security issues, China is pursuing a more subtle, long-term approach. As early as 1999, Beijing sent the icebreaker Xue Long to Canadian waters—officially to collect scientific data. What initially looked like harmless research has developed into a targeted strategy over the years.

China is using scientific missions, research collaborations, and infrastructure projects to gradually establish a presence in the north. Underwater buoys, supposedly for oceanographic measurements, can also be used to monitor submarine movements. New icebreakers, equipped with state-of-the-art technology, are not only capable of breaking through the ice, but also of collecting research data that could be critical for infrastructure.

At the same time, China is pursuing a clever rhetorical strategy. The country increasingly refers to itself as a “near-Arctic state.” Although there is no basis for this status under international law, constant repetition means that this self-description is increasingly accepted in international forums. This gives Beijing a seat at the table when it comes to shaping Arctic norms and rules – a remarkable success for a country

located thousands of kilometers away from the region.

China is also active economically. Beijing is gaining influence through investments in ports, scientific stations, and projects in indigenous communities. Such commitments often appear to be development cooperation to the outside world, but can create dependencies in the long term. For regions in the north that suffer from economic bottlenecks and a lack of infrastructure, these offers are tempting – but they carry the risk of insidiously undermining Canada's sovereignty.

### **Indigenous communities: Recognized but vulnerable partners**

A central, often overlooked aspect of the Canadian Arctic is the role of the indigenous population. Inuit communities, collectively referred to as Inuit Nunangat, have their own political structures and a growing degree of self-government. The Canadian federal government has given greater recognition to this role in recent years, for example with the Inuit Nunangat Policy of 2024. But the reality remains ambivalent.

Many of these communities continue to struggle with inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, and the consequences of colonial inequalities. These gaps may make them vulnerable to external influence, for example from China.

This puts the Inuit between geopolitical fronts. They are not merely passive victims, but increasingly active players who represent their interests at the international level—for example, through the Inuit Circumpolar Council. However, the power asymmetries remain great, and there is a danger that their voices will be lost in the game played by the major powers.

### **Two strategies-one area of tension**

A comparison of the influence strategies of the US and China reveals clear differences. Washington acts openly, institutionally, and with a focus on security. The goal is clear: to protect North

America from external threats. The price for this is Canada's dependence on US security policy.

China, on the other hand, relies on a “gray zone strategy”: scientific cooperation, economic investment, and supposed rhetorical self-positioning. In this way, Beijing avoids open confrontation, but still creates facts that secure influence in the long term. The real strength of this strategy lies in the fact that it is more difficult to understand and even more difficult to regulate.

What both powers have in common is that they restrict Canada's room for maneuver. While the US exerts pressure from above, China targets gaps from below – where infrastructure is lacking, resources are scarce, and indigenous communities remain underserved.

### **Conclusion: A north in transition**

The Canadian Arctic is now a geopolitical hotspot where two world powers are clashing. For the US, the military defense of North America is the priority, while for China, it is establishing a long-term presence through research and investment. Canada is thus caught between two stools: on the one hand, it is dependent on American security guarantees, while on the other, it must prevent China from undermining its sovereignty through the back door.

How Canada incorporates the voices of the people in the North will be particularly crucial. Only if indigenous communities are no longer perceived as a weak point but as active partners can the North have a future that is not determined solely by external powers.

The Arctic is no longer an empty ice desert. It has become a central arena of international politics – and the question of whether Canada is able to protect its sovereignty and the interests of its northern population will determine the geopolitical balance in the entire region.

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