



NSM Blog, ed. Ursula Werther-Pietsch and Friederike Santner

Citation: Walker, *When the Ally Becomes the Threat*
NSM Blog September 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

September 23, 2026

When the Ally Becomes the Threat: Rethinking Arctic Security After Greenland

By Ilana Abbey Walker

Canada's Arctic Threat Map Has Changed

For years, Canadian Arctic security policy prepared for threats coming from the other side of the Arctic. Russia's military modernization represented the most immediate threat to Canadian security and sovereignty, while China's growing economic and strategic presence represented a longer-term challenge. Canada's answer was greater surveillance, military investment and deeper cooperation with its allies, above all, the United States.

But what happens when Canada's closest ally begins challenging the very principles Arctic security arrangements are supposed to protect?

The Canadian Arctic comprises roughly 40 percent of Canada's landmass, making Arctic sovereignty a fundamental Canadian security concern. Until recently, Canadian policy treated the region as one that could largely be managed through cooperation. Canada's 2024 *Arctic Foreign Policy* describes a longstanding effort to maintain the North as a "zone of low tension," relatively insulated from wider geopolitical and military competition. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine fundamentally disrupted that assumption. At the same time, climate change and declining sea ice are making Arctic waters increasingly accessible, adding new strategic significance to the region.

Russia's substantial Arctic military infrastructure, submarine capabilities and ability to project military power reinforced its position as Canada's most immediate military concern. China has been framed differently, as an emerging strategic and economic challenger. Although China is not an Arctic state, it has ambitions to become a "polar great power," has promoted a "Polar Silk Road," and



has demonstrated growing interest in Arctic shipping, research, infrastructure and critical minerals. Closer Russia-China cooperation has further intensified Canadian concerns about the region's changing strategic balance.

The United States, by contrast, was long assumed to be part of the answer. Through NORAD, Canada and the United States have built one of the world's most deeply integrated bilateral defence relationships. Canada alone has committed C\$38.6 billion over twenty years to modernizing its contribution to NORAD and continental defence.

That assumption now looks considerably less secure.

The Unexpected Threat: The United States

The most unexpected shift in Arctic security has not come from Moscow or Beijing, but from Washington. What makes this development particularly destabilizing is that the United States remains central to the security architecture designed to protect the Arctic from external threats.

The contradiction became especially clear in 2026. In May, the United States joined Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, including Greenland and the Faroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden in a joint statement on Arctic security. Together, the Arctic allies identified Russia's increased military activity and China's growing strategic interest as challenges to regional stability, while committing to greater military presence, surveillance, joint training and NATO cooperation (Global Affairs Canada, 2026).

Less than two months later, that united front was being tested from within. At the NATO summit in July, President Donald Trump reiterated that Greenland, an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark, should be controlled by the United States rather than Denmark. Denmark reaffirmed the territorial integrity of the Kingdom, while Greenland maintained that Greenlanders themselves would determine the territory's future.

By September, the rhetoric had expanded further. On September 8, Iceland summoned the U.S. ambassador after Trump posted a map depicting Canada, Greenland, Iceland and much of the rest of North America under the American flag and labelled "United States of America." Iceland's government called the post "completely inappropriate," while its prime minister emphasized that there is nothing normal about making light of the sovereignty of states.



Taken individually, these actions might be dismissed as political rhetoric. Taken together, and alongside repeated suggestions that Canada should become part of the United States, they raise a more difficult question about the changing Arctic security environment. The United States is not a military adversary to Canada in the way Russia is, nor does it represent the same strategic challenge as China. But security threats do not begin only with military invasion. Political and economic coercion, challenges to territorial integrity, and uncertainty over whether an ally will respect the sovereignty of its partners can also create serious security vulnerabilities.

For Canada, this creates a paradox that its existing Arctic strategy was never designed to resolve. Canada depends on the United States to help defend the Arctic from Russia and China while simultaneously having to consider vulnerabilities created by coercive pressure originating in Washington.

Why a Threat from an Ally Is Different

A threat from within an alliance creates a fundamentally different security problem from one posed by an external adversary. Russia threatening NATO territory is precisely the kind of challenge NATO was designed to deter. China's growing strategic presence in the Arctic is similarly something allies can coordinate to address. But what institution protects an alliance when its most powerful member challenges the sovereignty of another member?

This contradiction is particularly visible in NATO's new Arctic Sentry initiative. Launched in February 2026 in response to Russia's increased military activity and China's growing interest in the High North, Arctic Sentry brings NATO and national activities under a coordinated operational approach. Led by Joint Force Command Norfolk, it also coordinates with NORAD, U.S. Northern Command and U.S. European Command (NATO, 2026). American participation is therefore deeply embedded in the strategy intended to strengthen collective Arctic defence.

Arctic Sentry may strengthen NATO's military posture, but its effectiveness ultimately relies on something military capabilities alone cannot provide: confidence that allies will respect one another's sovereignty and act collectively when security is threatened.

A Russian military threat strengthens the logic of NATO. An American sovereignty threat risks weakening the logic of NATO itself.

Multilateral security depends on shared expectations: that territorial integrity will be respected, allies will not coerce one another, international law applies to partners as well as adversaries, and



collective security is genuinely collective. If those assumptions weaken, deterrence becomes less credible, regardless of how sophisticated military systems and plans become.

The vulnerability exposed by Arctic Sentry is therefore not primarily operational, but political. NATO can coordinate aircraft, ships, surveillance and troops across the Arctic. It is far less clear how it should respond when a challenge to allied sovereignty comes from within the alliance itself.

Indigenous Sovereignty Changes the Question

The debate over Greenland also exposes a deeper problem with how Arctic security is discussed. The question cannot simply be whether Greenland should remain part of the Kingdom of Denmark or come under American control. Greenlanders themselves have political agency, and their right to determine their future cannot be separated from questions of Arctic sovereignty and security.

This matters beyond Greenland. In the Canadian Arctic, Indigenous peoples are not peripheral stakeholders but rights-holders with established roles in governance. Inuit organizations have increasingly argued that Arctic security must include Inuit rights, knowledge, self-determination and community wellbeing, rather than simply territorial defence. My research found that although Indigenous participation has become more prominent in Canadian Arctic policy, state-defined priorities surrounding sovereignty and national security continue to shape the boundaries of that participation.

The dispute therefore raises a question extending beyond relations between Washington, Copenhagen and Ottawa: who has the authority to define what Arctic security means in the first place?

An Arctic security order that treats northern territories primarily as military positions, shipping corridors and resource deposits risks reproducing the colonial assumptions that contemporary Arctic governance has sought to move beyond. Protecting Arctic sovereignty must mean more than defending borders. It must also include protecting the political agency and self-determination of the people who live there.

What This Means for Canada and Multilateralism

The latest developments in Greenland illustrate both the problem and a possible path forward. In September, the United States, Denmark and Greenland reached an agreement intended to expand



the American military role in Greenland while preventing U.S. adversaries from establishing military bases or making sensitive investments there. Denmark and Greenland have insisted that the arrangement does not cede Greenlandic sovereignty. Denmark has also argued that Arctic security should increasingly become a NATO responsibility rather than rest primarily with Washington and Copenhagen. The precise terms of the agreement have not yet been made public.

These developments do not erase the tensions of the preceding months. Instead, they demonstrate why multilateral institutions matter. Unilateral demands for territorial control generated tension within the alliance. Negotiation among the United States, Denmark and Greenland, alongside a greater role for NATO, has instead moved the discussion toward collective security while formally preserving Greenlandic sovereignty.

Canada cannot respond to this changing environment simply by distancing itself from the United States. Geography, NORAD, NATO and decades of integrated continental defence make the United States an indispensable security partner. Yet recent events demonstrate that dependence can also create vulnerability. Canada must maintain necessary cooperation with Washington while strengthening its own Arctic capabilities, deepening relationships with European and Nordic allies, investing in northern communities and infrastructure, and ensuring that Indigenous governments have a meaningful role in defining Arctic security.

For decades, Canada's Arctic threat map offered relatively clear distinctions between allies and adversaries. Russia represented the immediate military threat, China the longer-term strategic challenge, and the United States the indispensable partner. That distinction is becoming considerably more complicated. The emerging challenge is not simply determining whether Washington has replaced Moscow or Beijing as the greatest threat, but recognizing that an ally can also become a source of insecurity.

The future of Arctic security will therefore depend on more than military capabilities. It will depend on whether sovereignty, territorial integrity, self-determination and international law are respected consistently, not only by adversaries, but by allies themselves.

As the Arctic changes, so too must Canada's understanding of where threats may come from, what security requires and who has the right to shape the future of the North.



References

- Department of National Defence. (2024). *Our North, strong and free: A renewed vision for Canada's defence*. Government of Canada, [Government of Canada](#)
- Department of National Defence. (2026). *Appearance before the Standing Senate Committee on National Security, Defence and Veterans Affairs (SECD): Mandate, priorities, and NATO 2%: 27 April 2026*. Government of Canada, [Government of Canada](#)
- Department of National Defence. (n.d.). *Fact sheet: Funding for continental defence and NORAD modernization*. Government of Canada, [Government of Canada](#)
- Global Affairs Canada. (2024). *Canada's Arctic foreign policy*. Government of Canada, [Government of Canada](#)
- Global Affairs Canada. (2026, May 22). *Joint statement on Arctic security from the Arctic Allies: Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark including Greenland and the Faroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States of America*. Government of Canada, [Government of Canada](#)
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2026, February 11). *NATO Secretary General outlines new activity, Arctic Sentry, ahead of Defence Ministers meeting*, [NATO](#)
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2026). *Arctic security*, [NATO Arctic Security](#)
- Reuters. (2026, July 7). *Trump reiterates at NATO summit that Greenland should be controlled by US, not Denmark*, [Reuters](#)
- Reuters. (2026, September 8). *Iceland summons US ambassador after Trump posts map showing island under American flag*, [Reuters](#)
- Reuters. (2026, September 18). *US and Denmark reach deal on Greenland, Trump says*, [Reuters](#)
- Reuters. (2026, September 21). *Denmark says NATO shares responsibility for Arctic security under Greenland deal*, [Reuters](#)
- Walker, I. A. (2026). *Guarding the melting North: Canada's Arctic security strategy in an era of climate change and geopolitical tension* [Master's thesis, University of Vienna/Diplomatic Academy of Vienna].



NSM Blog, ed. Ursula Werther-Pietsch and Friederike Santner

Citation: Walker, *When the Ally Becomes the Threat*
NSM Blog September 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>



Ilana Walker is an international affairs researcher and project professional based in Vienna. She holds a Master of Advanced International Studies from the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, where she specialized in international security and examined Canadian Arctic security in the context of climate change, geopolitical competition and Indigenous governance. Her research interests include Arctic and environmental security, multilateralism, international cooperation and global governance. She previously worked in the Parliament of Canada and has contributed to international policy initiatives including GLOBSEC and the New School of Multilateralism.

Her current work examines how environmental and geopolitical change is reshaping security, sovereignty and international cooperation in the Arctic.



Dive into the blog:

<https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog/>