

Special Operations Forces and Arctic Indigenous People

Partnering to Defend the North American Arctic Homeland

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Abstract

Climate change is reshaping global geopolitics, and the Arctic is now in the crosshairs of geostrategic competition. Because of these changes, more stakeholders than ever are strategizing about the Arctic. Special operations forces (SOF) have a global mission in support of US national security objectives, and the Arctic is increasingly relevant to US national security and the security of North America. Therefore, SOF commands in Canada, the United States, and the Kingdom of Denmark must integrate the Arctic into their missions as a region of increasing relevance and necessity to defend and secure their homelands. In collaboration with Indigenous communities of the North, SOF must understand and develop its future role within the North American Arctic. To do so and intentionally shape the future Arctic, SOF must align with and learn from the Indigenous people of the High North and share the responsibility for defending the homeland

Vignette

Along the most northern coastline of Alaska, the frigid Arctic cold menacingly embraces a long-range radar site at a gripping 35 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. A US Army Special Forces Operational Detachment–Alpha (ODA) links up with a local Alaskan Native guide to provide support to the ODA's reconnaissance of the radar site strategically placed in the North American Arctic. This exercise vignette during US Northern Command's (USNORTH-COM) joint exercise, Arctic Edge 2018,¹ reflects the increased strategic concerns Canada, the United States, and some European allies have with the security and stabilization of the complex Arctic region. As climate changes influence global politics, these rapid and colossal environmental shifts in the Arctic make for greater levels of accessibility among global players. The United States, Canada, and Denmark (via Greenland) face security concerns on their northern frontiers unlike any time in the past. Increased commercial and military activities now

motivate policy makers and strategists to renew their focus on and prioritization of homeland defense in the twenty-first century. Nations with Arctic interests have been diligent in building interoperability between their special operations forces (SOF) for the past decade and longer. A shift is now required that redirects SOF to prioritize their vital role in deterring potential threats and becoming prepared to respond to crises along the North American Arctic frontier. A critical partnership is necessary. SOF must ally with North American Indigenous peoples to learn how to thrive in the Arctic, gain further access throughout the region, and be mutually supportive of one another. Because Arctic Indigenous peoples have thrived in and been a part of the Arctic landscape for time immemorial, there is no more essential partnership than a SOF–Indigenous linkage to ensure effective Arctic operations in defense of the North American homeland.

Background

The confluence of multiple dynamic changes makes for conditions that have elevated the need to consider the North American Arctic as a frontline for defense. With changing environmental conditions, demands for increased recognition of sovereignty, and increased international tensions among strategic competitors, the United States, Canada, and Denmark find themselves amid a North American Arctic that necessitates a defensive imperative among regionally aligned forces. As the effects of climate change continue to mount and the Arctic ice decreases, regional security dynamics correspondingly shift. Warming oceans, melting permafrost, and altering biospherical systems are fundamentally changing the Arctic environment.² Transformations in ground conditions such as permafrost thawing require costly repairs, infrastructure modifications, and even relocating military assets such as ground-based radar sites.

Receding Arctic ice has increased commercial activities and efforts to advance national interests within the region. Regional thawing encourages further exploration for oil, gas, critical minerals, and biological resources. Additionally, the effects of increased tourism and trans-Arctic shipping traffic raise the potential for environmental disasters and economic friction. Shipping on two trans-Arctic sea routes—the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage—will bring increased maritime traffic and geostrategic competition. As states seek competitive advantages in the changing Arctic, international tensions are again on the rise.

Reemerging strategic competition in the Arctic has renewed tensions between the United States, Russia, and China. Regular Russian bomber flights into Alaska's air defense identification zone have, among other things, raised the Arctic's profile within the homeland defense conversation. Geostrategic competition and homeland defense considerations prompted the US Department of Defense

(DOD) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to devote more attention to developing Arctic strategies and include the Arctic in their planning and operations to defend American interests in the region.

These factors, among others, require greater levels of multi-domain awareness to anticipate and shape North America's posture to deter, deny, disrupt, and respond to crises within the polar region. Given the increased tensions, activities, and changes, special operations can serve as a foreign policy instrument and a military tool that can be applied strategically and mitigate risks or conflict escalation. Additionally, the advancements Indigenous people are making to validate and reinforce their sovereignty and create more positive conditions for their respective communities strengthen their demands for legitimacy. Securing the North American homeland is a mutual interest of all who reside within its borders, including the Indigenous people of the United States, Canada, and Greenland. Just as SOF are integral to the future of homeland defense in the High North, Indigenous people are integral partners to the overall effort. Indigenous leaders, communities, and institutions can contribute to expanding SOF's Arctic knowledge and capabilities. Therefore, the SOF-Indigenous partnership is a critical component of future North American homeland defense.

The security of the North American Arctic is a function, in large part because of the Indigenous people and other, non-Native individuals, who live in the High North. More than 80 percent of the people who live in the North American High North are Indigenous, and their presence serves to validate Canadian and US claims of sovereignty in the region.³ However, methods for including these Indigenous peoples remain undefined or unspecified. Issues with permissions and authorities regarding interactions between military forces and northern communities, law enforcement, and other agencies need attention. SOF are a critical and key mechanism to deter, deny, and protect the North American Arctic. A part of that effort is accomplished by building effective and long-term relationships among Indigenous communities and organizations. An enduring and sustained relationship between SOF and North America's Arctic Indigenous people must be intentional, formative, and fostered to make North American Arctic security and safety networks effective. Canadian, American, and Danish SOF are well positioned for this task. The leaders of these three countries, the "North American Arctic tripoint," must recognize the critical value of using SOF to forge paths fostering productive relationships between special operators and Indigenous people.

Unlike in the lower latitudes of North America, the demographics of the High North consist of widely dispersed pockets of primarily Indigenous people. The Indigenous ancestral knowledge and skills needed to survive, thrive, and operate in Arctic and near-Arctic conditions are unparalleled. Military forces operating in

the Arctic must leverage this critical knowledge base. As military planners, analysts, and strategists conceptualize defending the homeland, SOF are the ideal choice for working with Indigenous people, just as they have with other indigenous cultures around the world for more than seven decades.⁴ However, when considering the defense of North America, Indigenous people are not citizens of a foreign nation; they are legitimate citizens of North America's homeland with sovereign rights rooted in each nation's laws. The North American Arctic tripoint must lean forward to chart synchronized and cogent paths to integrate the different Indigenous peoples inhabiting the High North.

Building enduring relationships between each country's Indigenous citizens and the military are complex endeavors. Historical trauma, Native sovereignty challenges, and differences in worldview produce significant obstacles to establishing trusting relationships. These are not insurmountable challenges, though. Planners and policy makers must focus on particular aspects of Indigenous–military relations to achieve lasting partnerships in an effort to secure and defend the homeland.

At this point it is helpful to explain why Greenland is included as part of the North American Arctic. Greenland sits on the North American tectonic plate and is closer to Canada and the United States than it is to Denmark. More importantly, Greenland's population is predominately Greenlandic Inuit people. They comprise about 85 percent of the island's total population. Coupled with the existence of the US Space Force's base at Thule, Greenland, Canada and Greenland's shared land and sea border, and traditional ties between the three nations, Greenland has been included as part of the North American security discussions. Further, because Greenland is a territory of the Kingdom of Denmark and falls within the Danish security umbrella, Danish SOF are logically considered among the SOF tripoints. Given these intersections, Denmark's military has relational responsibilities with Greenland's Native people.

When considering a strategic approach with SOF and Indigenous people, having a foundation of the historical context of SOF and the Arctic gives some background on how to begin thinking about SOF working with Indigenous communities and leaders. Next, understanding the complexities of Indigenous sovereignty better informs defense efforts to forge respectful and unifying relationships that are reciprocal, not transactional. Lastly, we offer suggestions that policy makers, strategists, and military leaders ought to consider in building an enduring and working relationship. This partnership must be inclusive and diverse and value sovereignty.

Historical Lessons to Be Learned in the North

In June 1942, Japan invaded Alaska's Aleutian Island chain and occupied two small islands: Kiska and Attu. Though the motivation for Japan's Aleutian opera-

tion was most likely to create a distraction for the eventual Battle of Midway in the Pacific, the strategic implications of adversarial occupation on United States soil were, at the time, significant and led to expanded conversation regarding the strategic value of Alaska and the Arctic as a future potential battlespace and avenue of approach. During the joint United States–Canadian air and ground campaign to reclaim the lost islands, there were more casualties caused by cold injuries than from combat.⁵ The extreme conditions of operating militarily in an Arctic climate with ill-prepared soldiers, and at the end of a long and fragile supply chain, raised awareness about the difficulty of sustained operations in such severe and austere environments in the future.

During the Cold War, the Arctic was among the most militarized regions on Earth, with a significant Soviet presence in northern and eastern Russia but also regular United States, Canadian, and European air and maritime forces based in the Arctic and sub-Arctic from Alaska to Canada and Greenland and across the North Atlantic to cover Iceland, the United Kingdom, and Norway. The Soviets and NATO regularly tested each other's air defenses through freedom of navigation sorties by long-range aviation. Ground operations included operating and maintaining long-range radars to keep a watchful eye for Soviet long-range bombers as well as allied forces operations in Northern Europe.⁶ Whether during World War II or the Cold War, military forces operated in the Arctic and in Arctic-like conditions enough to glean lessons that should inform future strategies and logistics.

The lessons that emerge from conventional military operations in cold weather conditions can inform our approach to military planning today. The US military can operate in cold weather, but it lacks the experience of operating in the extreme cold of the Arctic. This provides opportunities for better training, informed by lessons from past operations. The challenge? Arctic campaigns have been understudied in favor of campaigns associated with more familiar ground. Still, twenty-first-century technologies have made some improvements in military capabilities and capacities to operate in extreme cold conditions. Military equipment—outer garments and sheltering systems, as examples—have improved exposure tolerance to extreme cold and enhanced troop mobility.⁷ What was impossible in the 1940s and 1950s is possible today such that the Arctic extremes are less limiting than ever before. Still, there are limits.

Issues such as force structures, developing unit regional expertise, and building competencies to conduct sustained and coordinated operations in extreme cold weather operations need to be addressed. If SOF are to succeed in future Arctic operations, conventional forces and SOF must adapt to the global and climatic conditions of the Arctic via organizational structures and command-and-control

processes designed specifically for Arctic operations. This necessitates changes to force design and placement, as a starting point. Now and ahead are opportunities to improve US forces to conduct operations in the Arctic.

Definitions and Delimitations

Special operations forces are those military units that conduct special operations and provide precise, discrete, and scalable options that can be synchronized with activities that are a part of a government's objectives.⁸ The discrete nature of their missions differentiates SOF from conventional forces that require larger operational footprints, longer support chains, and greater sustainment requirements. These are inherently limiting factors to conventional forces that SOF can overcome because of their smaller tactical footprint and much smaller logistical support requirements.

Some special operations are stunning direct-action raids that draw wide publicity, but often, other operations take an indirect approach and garner little or no recognition. Special operations are an effort to resolve, as economically as possible, specific problem sets that lie at the operational or strategic levels that conventional forces alone would find difficult or impossible to address.

These [special] operations are designed in a culturally attuned manner to create immediate and enduring effects to help prevent and deter conflict or prevail in war. They assess and shape foreign political and military environments unilaterally, or with host nations, multinational partners, and Indigenous populations.

Special operations warfare is replete with accounts on how military special operators rely on local people to understand the environment and lead change in a country. During World War II special operators trained anti-Japanese guerilla forces in Burma, Malaya, the Philippines, and elsewhere.⁹ Through partnerships with local leaders, the anti-Japanese campaigns in Southeast Asia served to tie up enemy forces that could have been used in other theaters of the war in the Pacific. Such activities were beyond the capabilities of conventional forces. Whether conducting unconventional warfare or foreign internal defense (FID) operations to assist host nations in combating internal security threats, SOF engage local people to gain situational awareness, employ strategic and precision military action, or build security forces as part of a campaign. The essential point here is the integrated and intimate nature of these missions enable SOF to establish deeper relationships and gain greater understanding of sensitive social, cultural, and political dynamics of the operational environment. More substantive relationships translate to greater knowledge and understanding of the context and climate of a given environment. Furthermore, SOF develop tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) appropriate to local conditions and purposes. These are precisely the types

of relationships US SOF need to establish with the Indigenous people of the High North. As the United States looks to expand its operational footprint in the Arctic and improve its capacity to operate in extreme cold, the SOF–Indigenous partnership will be critical to gaining the requisite knowledge and skills to thrive in the Arctic.

For our purposes, characterization of *Indigenous*, *Aboriginal*, *First Nation*, and *Native peoples* are applied somewhat synonymously. That is, *Native* denotes people with indigenous ancestral lineage. Additionally, *Alaska Native*, *American Indians*, and *First Nations* are references to Indigenous people of the North American continent. There are tribes, clans, and distinctive groups of Indigenous peoples who live and thrive in the High North.

The Indigenous People of the North

For thousands of years, Indigenous people in the Arctic have learned how to thrive in extreme cold weather, traverse roadless lands, and navigate in demanding maritime conditions. Despite some degradation of the traditional ways of life among many Indigenous people over the past century, people native to the land continue to adapt to the dynamic Arctic conditions. There is an epistemology, a way of knowing, that is grounded in a place-based knowledge system—one where knowledge generation occurs within the context of a place and its natural cycles. Arctic Indigenous subsistence hunters, for example, are regional experts on animal behaviors and possess historical knowledge of the land.¹⁰ Examples like this form the basis of an evolving knowledge system that guides Indigenous communities on how to thrive in demanding climatic conditions.¹¹

Arctic Indigenous people have historical roots in supporting the security and safety within the Arctic. The knowledge on what looks right, understanding the unique Arctic climate, and being skilled to traverse difficult terrain in challenging conditions are relevant knowledge and skills that must be integrated into future SOF Arctic deployments. Indigenous knowledge is essential for US troop deployments aimed at securing the most northern borders of North America. More so in Alaska and Canada, many Indigenous people take exceptional pride in their respective countries' armed services. In the United States, American Indians and Alaska Natives have been the leading minority groups to join the armed serves per capita than any other demographic group. Both Alaska Natives and American Indians contribute to the volunteer force five times more than any other demographic group.¹² There is precedent for leveraging Indigenous knowledge for homeland defense purposes. Alaska Natives and Indigenous people of Canada have a legacy of being frontline observers having a watchful eye against hostile incursions into North America since World War II.¹³

United States

The Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG), more commonly known as the Eskimo Scouts, was formed during World War II as a military reserve force component of the US Army. Its organization in 1942 was a response to Japan's attacks on Hawai'i and the occupation of parts of Alaska's Aleutian Chain. The ATG served to identify potential Japanese incursions in Alaska along the territory's expansive coastline.¹⁴ There was some initial controversy in recruiting and arming Alaska Natives as at the time there was legal and social segregation by race across Alaska. The participation of Alaska Natives in the military during World War II, despite these bitter circumstances, speaks well of the patriotism and hopefulness of that generation of Alaska Natives. However, the ATG has since dissolved, and there are no subsequent similar organizations in Alaska.

Canada

Above 60 degrees North latitude, Canada is sparsely populated and possesses little infrastructure. The Canadian Rangers, a subcommand of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), live and work in remote and isolated areas, serving as forward observers, of sorts, for the Canadian Arctic. Mostly comprised of First Nation members, the Canadian Rangers provide local information on unusual activities and events that may have military interests.¹⁵ Additionally, local patrols contribute to domestic efforts led by the CAF, share local knowledge, and perform search-and-rescue activities in support of military operations. Further, Canadian Rangers provide mentoring and coaching to the Junior Canadian Ranger Program, which engages local youth to build skills and knowledge related to the roles the Canadian Rangers fill.

The Canadian Rangers model serves as a useful reference point when considering a formal Indigenous militarized organization with an active role in defending the homeland and supporting crisis response. Although many lessons could be learned from the Canadian Rangers integration into the CAF's military efforts, establishing a comparable United States Indigenous force in Alaska with similar command relationships has inherent challenges. However, recruiting Alaska Native individuals to join the Alaska National Guard is one avenue, albeit different. Nonetheless, there are regulatory and structural limits that constrain the prospect in forming something that parallels the Canadian Rangers. Budgetary vulnerabilities, political dynamics, limited resources, and a lack of urgency make such an endeavor unlikely at this time, either at the state or federal levels.

Greenland/Denmark

The history of Indigenous people formally integrated into Western military forces in Greenland does not have the same legacy as found in the United States or Canada. Greenland is an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. Greenland relies on the Danes—and a twentieth-century US-backed treaty—for its defense and security. The Danish Special Operations Command coordinates the Sirius Dog Sled Patrols under the auspices of the Danish naval SOF that actively patrols the northern portions of Greenland six months out of the year as a means of asserting Danish sovereignty in the Arctic.¹⁶ This northern patrol is the only active and recurring Arctic patrol executed by a special operations unit among the United States, Canada, and Denmark. Although the Greenlandic Inuit people make up most of the island's population, there is no formal force arrangement between Greenland's Indigenous people and Denmark's military.

Discussion

US special operators, leaders, and planners are uniquely skilled, organized, and trained to build and implement a cohesive strategy that integrates Native leaders, communities, and elders in support of defending our homeland. US SOF have long engaged nonstate actors and societal influencers in overseas security force assistance and foreign military training operations as an essential element of cultural assimilation efforts. The same approach can, and should, be pursued in the United States and Canada between US SOF and Indigenous peoples. Working with and through Indigenous people is what SOF do.¹⁷ Therefore, when considering special operations in the High North, the Arctic Indigenous people partnered with national SOF would improve northern security and offer a unique resource for safety in the remote and isolated Arctic region.

Integration of SOF and Indigenous peoples in North America will be different than it has been for overseas special operations. Unconventional and irregular warfare doctrine orients toward foreign partners, not Indigenous people who are US, Canadian, or Danish citizens. National laws influence how SOF might appropriately interact with Indigenous populations, which can affect knowledge exchange, skills development, and Indigenous community support. North American Indigenous peoples are a valuable future partner for collaboration, cooperation, and learning, but recalibrating the SOF enterprise to work with its own citizens requires intentional planning and inclusive dialogue with partners and other stakeholders.

The Way Ahead

Defending the homeland requires a unified effort. The Indigenous peoples living in the High North have a vested interest in preserving and reinforcing their sovereignty: economically, politically, and culturally. SOF is uniquely poised to build relationships with Indigenous people, prepare for operations in remoted and austere conditions, and indirectly supporting defensive lines of effort with small units. Simultaneously, though, SOF is still learning how to conduct sustained operations under North American Arctic conditions across the varied special operations mission sets. Therefore, there is a natural alignment—an operational and tactical imperative—for SOF and Indigenous communities to build and sustain enduring relationships to improve security and safety in the North American Arctic.

Native communities have contributed to securing the homeland since World War II. However, to advance the defense of the homeland in the twenty-first century, a coherent and resourced strategy must begin with advancing the relationships between SOF and Indigenous communities. Working with local law enforcement, conducting training and exercises in the High North, and learning some of the cultural ways that have sustained Native people for thousands of years are a few efforts US, Canadian, and Danish SOF could immediately pursue. By engaging in such activities, SOF units operating in the High North will forge productive relationships while developing essential knowledge and skills for enhanced Arctic operations. Making and sustaining trust relationships with Indigenous communities will allow for future opportunities to collaborate and evolve the relationships. Connecting SOF with Indigenous communities promotes formalized partnerships in time, thus opening pathways for improved doctrinal and policy development integrating SOF–Indigenous relationships. Identifying tensions, co-constructing collaborative solutions, and learning from those lessons during peacetime training, exercises, and other shared experiences will contribute to building trust and enduring relationships.

Make and Sustain Contact

With any emerging relationship, we must establish connections supporting cross communications between Indigenous communities and SOF leaders. A variety of mechanisms are available to initiate a dialogue to find common interests. Participating in Native-led roundtables, attending planning conferences, and conducting leader-to-leader engagements are some mediums where the SOF–Indigenous integration can occur. In these interactions, SOF exercises its tradition of listening, understanding, and exploring possibilities. US SOF can look to Canada's Joint Task Force North (JTFN) as the example of such integration efforts. JTFN

is the force employer for the CAF in the High North and has made impressive gains in developing these mutually supportive relationships. JTFN planners look for economic opportunities to connect Indigenous-led businesses to military logistical requirements, as an example.¹⁸

Conducting these culture-based community engagements demands military leaders learn about their future partners, their cultures, their communities, and their way of life. Indigenous peoples can have a worldview that, at times, might be at odds with traditional Western values.¹⁹ In North America, Arctic and sub-Arctic Indigenous communities often practice a subsistence lifestyle. Communities make decisions according to nature's cycles and not human-derived agendas. Therefore, making contact and developing sustainable relationships requires a more humble, respectful, and curious approach by military leaders. US SOF are trained and assessed on their abilities to engage Native leaders from this approach.²⁰ It is a natural alignment that must be pursued.

As with any initiative, US planners must develop a strategic engagement plan. This strategic Native engagement plan must consider Indigenous sovereignty. This type of effort requires a collaborative and organic approach that considers Indigenous, military, civilian, and business leader interests to ensure an engagement plan that also meets legal and ethical standards.

Address Systemic Barriers

Engagement plans will inevitably identify barriers to collaboration and produce conflict. In particular, historical traumas exist with Indigenous people throughout North America. Future US SOF–Indigenous integration requires sensitivities to these issues and historical anecdotes. US SOF cannot expect unconditional welcoming by Indigenous peoples and must approach future engagement plans mindful of history. Structural inequalities and validation of sovereignty are likely to surface during these initial dialogues. Additionally, subsistence management is a point of contention in Alaska. Alaska Native organizations and communities look for greater authority on how to manage fisheries and mammal harvesting as a means of their survival, balancing undue advantage and Indigenous business access is already a complicated situation in Alaska. Under the US CARES Act, Alaska Native regional corporations seek access to US congressional funds where other non-Native corporations have little legal justifications. This is only one example of the many complications that will naturally surface during future SOF–Indigenous engagements and planning efforts.

Making connections and outlining a path forward creates opportunities to build meaningful relationships. SOF units are poised to support these types of engagements but will need calibration. SOF non-Native service members will

require cultural training and persistent engagements to improve awareness and familiarity to some of the views, norms, and preferences of regional Native communities. Investing in specified training for SOF–Indigenous engagements brings benefits of greater receptivity and commitment to the cause.

Build and Enhance Working Partnerships

There are several tangible connections to make between SOF and Indigenous communities. Creating and exercising partnership agreements between medical communities is an example of building a long-term connection. Establishing legal and ethically appropriate channels for exchanges of medicines or services bodes well when creating enduring relationships. Such engagements have happened, albeit informally. A regional Native nonprofit care provider, the Tanana Chiefs Conference, donated COVID-19 vaccines to a US air base for its Airmen, as a recent example.²¹ These kinds of positive exchanges build meaningful and trusting relationships between US military personnel and Indigenous communities. Leaders should anticipate legal dilemmas when building and exercising partnerships; however, the advantages would outweigh such difficulties.

SOF and Indigenous community leaders can leverage existing opportunities for collaboration. Both countries' militaries have requirements to support defense activities that can align with Indigenous communities' interests. SOF exercise planners can look to Indigenous-led companies and community leaders for servicing contracts prior to and during exercises. A contractual agreement for services can contribute to improving economic security among Native communities while simultaneously developing training opportunities for SOF to learn and develop Arctic capabilities. SOF can also conduct community assessments aimed at development and land leasing for future training activities that provides economic benefit to Indigenous communities while enabling SOF to develop greater regional expertise and cultural awareness.

Conclusion

It bears repeating the increasingly obvious: climate change is reshaping global geopolitics, and the Arctic is now in the crosshairs of geostrategic competition. Because of these changes, more stakeholders than ever are strategizing about the Arctic. SOF has a global mission in support of US national security objectives, and the Arctic is increasingly relevant to US national security and the security of North America. Therefore, SOF commands in Canada, the United States, and the Kingdom of Denmark must integrate the Arctic into their missions as a region of increasing relevance and necessity to defend and secure their homelands. In collabora-

tion with Indigenous communities of the North, SOF must understand and develop its future role within the North American Arctic. To do so and intentionally shape the future Arctic, SOF must align with and learn from the Indigenous people of the High North and share the responsibility for defending the homeland. 🌟

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Notes

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