

CONVERSATIONS ON STRATEGY

PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

Michael E. Lynch and Howard G. Coombs *International Competition in the High North* *2022 Conference Volume*

The 16th annual Kingston Consortium on International Security conference, “International Competition in the High North,” took place on October 11–13, 2022, in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. The conference examined the Arctic region in the context of ongoing climate change and against the backdrop of war in Ukraine. Over the past several years, the United States has acknowledged the growing importance of the Arctic as a strategic region, and the Department of Defense and each of the US military services have published Arctic policies or strategies. In addition, the Department of Defense has created a new regional studies center, the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies in Alaska. Canada and the other Arctic Council nations have also acknowledged the growing importance of the Arctic region, revised strategic frameworks, and changed institutional approaches to ensure Arctic security challenges arising from great-power competition and other threats, like those to the environment, are addressed. This volume captures these ideas for the United States and its allies so all can benefit from this experience.

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Episode Transcript

Stephanie Crider (Host)

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My guests today are Dr. Michael E. Lynch and Dr. Howard G. Coombs, editors of *International Competition in the High North 2022 Conference Volume* from the Kingston Consortium on International Security, 2022.

Lynch is a research professor of national security affairs at the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College.

Coombs is an associate professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada and the deputy director of the Queen’s University Centre for International and Defense Policy.

Welcome to Conversations on Strategy, Michael and Howard.

Michael E. Lynch

Thank you.

Howard G. Coombs

Thank you.

Host

The Kingston Consortium on International Security met in October 2022. For our listeners who might not know, what is the Kingston Consortium on International Security, and what are its goals?

<http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/cos>

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Lynch

The Kingston Consortium on International Security consists of four organizations: the US Army War College and the Strategic Studies Institute, Queen's College—specifically, the Centre for International Defence Policy, which Howard represents—the NATO Defense College, and the Canadian Forces College. The purpose of this consortium is to bring together academics and practitioners annually to discuss issues of importance to national security affairs.

Host

The papers resulting from this consortium covered a lot of ground, and there was a strong emphasis on the Arctic. Why the Arctic? Why now?

Coombs

Stephanie, that's a great question. I think when one looks at the conference volume, the reproduced keynotes from General Wayne Eyre, the Chief of Defense Staff for Canada, as well as Major General Roch Pelletier, who is the commander of the Canadian Army Doctrine Center, they globally look at the whole question of the geopolitical aspects of the Arctic.

However, all the different chapters inform that dialogue by looking at different facets of it. And the reason this really is bubbling to the surface now is that there are a number of issues that are coming to the fore from resource extraction. Because of climate change, the melting of the Arctic ice has made previously inaccessible oil and natural gas and mineral resources more readily available. And this, of course, in turn, has led to more geopolitical competition.

The same climate change has opened up more shipping routes across the Arctic, which allows potentially very shortened transit times for sea freight, and it will also, in turn, reduce the cost of transportation. Also, we can't put aside the fact that there is a great deal of geopolitical competition going on right now, and it is rising. Many of the Arctic states have conflicting claims to Arctic territory, including Russia, Canada, the United States, Denmark, and Norway. Because of this, some militaries—including Russia—are bolstering their military presence in the Arctic, and that, of course, leads to further security concerns.

Host

Climate change and how it has impacted the Arctic. Is there anything left we need to talk about here?

Lynch

Yes, as Howard alluded to, the climate change in the Arctic has specifically presented large opportunities for Asian nations, such as China, to shorten their trade routes to Europe through the now more passable Arctic routes. But it's also presented challenges because that also yields a vulnerability for all of the Arctic nations. Because there is competition in the Arctic, both commercially and potentially militarily, this gives us another avenue to exploit.

Focusing on your previous question—why now? We are specifically focusing more on the Arctic now because there is this increased tension, and even danger because of this potential new route through the Arctic. In addition to that, as we look at our bases in the Arctic, some of the bases that were built decades ago to exist on permafrost are now experiencing problems because of melting permafrost, and we're now having to relook at how we design buildings and facilities in the Arctic.

Host

The consortium also addresses indigenous tribes in relation to current security challenges. Please tell us about this dynamic.

Coombs

It's very interesting because there was a lot of discussion in terms of the relationship of indigenous population to different types of special operations forces, as well as the role of indigenous peoples, in Arctic security. And James Morton, in particular, addressed that within the edited volume.

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A number of things came out in this discussion, [such as] the understanding of indigenous peoples of the Arctic itself [and] the traditional knowledge that they understand and how that can inform our perspective on all kinds of aspects of the Arctic region, from environmental stewardship to security concerns. And in that latter area, the conference talked about and explored the various aspects of the role of indigenous people in helping us with issues involving security, and that included things like search and rescue in the North [and] acting as guides and scouts for conventional and other types of forces. The organizations that are forged between indigenous peoples also form a transnational series of cooperative organizations (such as the Inuit Circumpolar Council, who also work to supplement the Arctic Council—which is the international form of states) to assist with Arctic governance and security and, most importantly, in terms of climate change—which is a real thing happening in the north—the idea of the indigenous peoples and their environmental stewardship of the land and how that can assist us with mitigating the effects of climate change. Those were all aspects that we looked at and are discussed in the various chapters of the volume.

Lynch

Those of us who don't live in specifically Arctic regions have a lot to learn from the indigenous people who live there every day. And we're looking at that both from a military and a social perspective. We also realize as we start to try to construct or establish some sort of national security program or defense in the High North, we need to address the concerns and requirements of the people who live there.

Host

How does strategic competition play a part in the current Arctic scenario?

Lynch

That's a great question, Stephanie, especially in the context of what's going on today. The Arctic nations are combined in the Arctic Council. It's a group of eight nations, which, up until last year, worked very equitably together on issues related to the Arctic—primarily in the scientific realm. One of those nations is Russia. Russia has 50 percent of the population of the Arctic resident in Russia. They withdrew from the Arctic Council after the invasion of Ukraine, which threw the Arctic Council into some sort of disarray. Now, it's not a governing body, but it is a coordinating body, and so the cooperation we previously enjoyed has become more competitive. And now that Sweden and Finland—both Arctic Council members—have petitioned to join NATO, that puts a different cast on the Arctic Council because now seven of the nations are or will be NATO nations, the eighth being Russia. That sort of competition remains as one of our challenges to explore.

Host

Tell us about Arctic cooperation. How likely is it, and how should it look?

Coombs

If I were to summarize that, I would say it's things like, what does Arctic cooperations look like? It's adherence to international law, it's environmental responsibility. It's indigenous involvement, resource-management agreements, transnational resource-management agreements, scientific collaboration across the states, search-and-rescue cooperation, conflict prevention, using—as Michael has said—the Arctic Council to achieve dialogue and maintain those diplomatic channels.

And something we really haven't talked about is infrastructure. Infrastructure and investment. Although it is talked about in the book, we haven't brought it out in this discussion. Infrastructure was highlighted as being very important within almost every chapter. And when we talk infrastructure, it's not just about buildings. It's about ports, icebreakers, and telecommunications and having that type of infrastructure that is circumpolar in nature, which can connect the Arctic nations.

I would also say diplomacy and dialogue (are) incredibly important [and] transparency of all activities amongst the nations in the Arctic. In sum, really it's about principles of responsibility, sustainable development, respect for indigenous rights

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and knowledge, adherence to international law, and a commitment to maintaining this unique environment. So, I know they're all very broad and overarching ideas, but I think over the course of the conference and the output of this book, we've touched on many of those themes, if not in detail, as a facet of the discussion.

Lynch

The only thing I could add to that, from the infrastructure perspective, is related to what we just discussed about the indigenous people. All of the infrastructure discussion that Howard just mentioned also implies a lot of power requirements and bandwidth requirements when it comes to communications. The power requirements become much more significant because of the cold. And how do you refuel? What sort of power source are you using? There isn't a lot of that resident in the High North now, or at least not what defense establishments would need in order to be there.

So, one of the things that some of our authors discussed is the possibility of dual-use infrastructure—in other words, infrastructure that is established in order to serve a national security purpose for North America but could also provide some benefit to the indigenous people who live there. There are jobs to be had to build this infrastructure, establish it, run it, that sort of thing. But there are all sorts of other possibilities that we need to explore.

Thomas Hughes, one of our scholars who worked on this volume, points out that the Arctic—despite the competition, after the Russia-Ukraine War is over—provides a possible venue for renewed cooperation with the Russians, specifically, scientifically, initially, and then perhaps in other ways. As we look out to the future, this may be a way to allow Russia to begin to reengage with the international community.

Host

I'd love to hear any concluding thoughts you might like to share.

Coombs

I think the future of the Arctic, from a Canadian perspective, involves managing the opportunities and challenges posed by increased economic activity, shipping, resource development, and environmental changes in the region. From a Canadian point of view, our approach will need to balance those economic interests with environmental sustainability, indigenous rights, and, of course, security considerations, while fostering international cooperation in this unique part of the world.

Lynch

I think the nature of this conference really shows this cooperation on the Arctic that we're talking about. It was purely academic and practitioner based, and it was heavily US and Canadian, but it was not exclusively binational. We had scholars from around the world who came together to discuss Arctic issues and, specifically, how those issues affected their regions.

At this point, I'd like to show the United States' commitment to study of the Arctic. It recently established the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies in Alaska to examine the issues related to this region. It's the seventh of our regionally focused centers that apply some academic rigor to studying the issues there.

I would also like to identify all of our authors and the organizations they represented because they provide some great background for future reading, and they really are the subject matter experts in a lot of this.

Our practitioners included General Wayne Eyre, who is the Canadian Armed Forces Chief of the Defence Staff. Major General Roch Pelletier, Commander of the Canadian Army Doctrine and Training Centre [Headquarters]. Major General Janeen L. Birkhead, the 31st Adjutant General of the Maryland Army National Guard, Majors Devin Kirkwood, Barrett Martin, and Michael Tovo of the US Army Special Operations Command. Dr. Andrea Charron is Professor of Political Studies at the University of Manitoba and the Director of the Centre

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for Defense and Security Studies. Dr. J.P. Clark is an associate professor of military strategy at the US Army War College and the editor in chief of *War Room*, the Army War College's online journal. Dr. Joseph L. Corriveau is the Director of the Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory. Dr. Michele Devlin is Professor of Environmental Security at the US Army War College and Professor of Arctic Health and Human Security with the National Science Foundation's University of Northern Iowa Arctic Center. Dr. James Fergusson is the Deputy Director for the Centre for Defence and Security Studies at the University of Manitoba. Dr. Kathryn Friedman is the North American Arctic Policy Adviser at the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies. Dr. Will (Wilfred) Greaves is Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of Victoria. Dr. Thomas Hughes is the McKenna Post-Doctoral Fellow at Mount Allison University. Dr. Rauna J. Kuokkanen is Research Professor of Arctic Indigenous Studies at the University of Lapland. Lori Leffler is Deputy Director and Chief of Staff of the Irregular Warfare Center. Dr. James Morton [Jr.] is Assistant Research Professor, Center for Alaska Native Health Research, University of Alaska Fairbanks. And Dr. Camilla Sørensen is associate professor at the Institute for Strategy and War Studies at the Royal Danish Defence College. And finally, I'd like to thank our two military fellows. During the 2023 academic year, the Centre for International Defence Policy at Queen's University hosted US Army War College fellow [Lieutenant] Colonel Wendy Tokach and Canadian visiting defense fellow Colonel Ryan Jurkowski. Their work as fellows did a great deal to support this conference as well as their contributions to this volume.

Host

Listeners, you can download the *International Competition in the High North 2022 Conference Volume* it at press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs.

Howard and Michael, thank you for making time to speak with me today, this was a real pleasure.

Lynch

Thanks very much, Stephanie.

Coombs

Thank you for inviting us.

Host

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