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INUIT TAPIRIIT KANATAMI

# An Inuit Vision for Arctic Sovereignty, Security and Defence

June 2025

# About Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) is the national representative organization for Inuit in Canada, the majority of whom live in Inuit Nunangat, the Inuit homeland encompassing 51 communities across the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (Northern Québec), and Nunatsiavut (Northern Labrador). Inuit Nunangat makes up 40 percent of Canada's land area, 72 percent of its coastline and 35 percent of its surface freshwater. ITK represents the rights and interests of Inuit at the national level through a democratic governance structure that represents all Inuit regions. We advocate for policies, programs, and services to address the social, cultural, political, and environmental issues facing our people.

The voting members of ITK's Board of Directors are the leadership of the four Inuit Treaty Organizations:

- Chair and CEO, Inuvialuit Regional Corporation
- President, Makivvik
- President, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated
- President, Nunatsiavut Government

In addition to voting members, the following non-voting Permanent Participant Representatives also sit on the Board:

- President, Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada
- President, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada
- President, National Inuit Youth Council

## **Vision**

Canadian Inuit are prospering through unity and self-determination.

## **Mission**

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami is the national voice for protecting and advancing the rights and interests of Inuit in Canada.

# Background

Canada would not be an Arctic State without Inuit. Inuit sovereignty is Canada's sovereignty. Yet Canada trails all other Arctic States in developing its Arctic territory, exposing our country to security threats, sovereignty violations, and foreign interference. For example, ageing or non-existent transportation infrastructure, such as ports, harbors, and paved runways, make the region more expensive and difficult to access and monitor, while limited telecommunications infrastructure and connectivity forces our communities to rely on foreign satellite technology.

Prospering Inuit communities are integral to Canada's sovereignty and long-term security and defence objectives in the Arctic, given our rights, unique knowledge of the region, and strength of our communities. Our people are the most knowledgeable about the Arctic, having continuously used and occupied Inuit Nunangat for centuries. However, despite the region's growing geopolitical significance, Inuit continue to experience preventable social and economic inequities caused by lack of infrastructure and limited access to services.

The 51 Inuit communities of Inuit Nunangat are the hubs from which Inuit hunters, harvester and researchers monitor thousands of square kilometers of terrestrial and marine area, including the entirety of the Northwest Passage. Our people are the eyes and ears in this geopolitically coveted space, providing in-kind support to the thin ranks of Canadian Coast Guard and Canadian Armed Forces personnel in the region.

We are observing shipping traffic increase throughout our homeland and a growing international presence of foreign actors seeking to assert influence over our future. Inuit are alarmed by Canada's muted response to these developments and lack of political will to bring Inuit Nunangat into the rest of Canada.

Inuit are proud Canadians. We share our fellow citizens' concerns about threats to Canada's sovereignty and security. While we welcome recent pledges made by national political leaders to prioritize the region, a more ambitious vision for developing and bringing it into the rest of Canada is the only long-term solution for securing the Arctic.

As Canada turns toward the Arctic, governments must prioritize Inuit prosperity and perspectives as the foundation of Arctic security, sovereignty and defence. Canada must work more closely with Inuit to develop an effective security policy for Inuit Nunangat that recognizes the importance of human security to national security.

The welfare of our people and communities has always been and continues to be secondary to Canada's security interests. This must change.

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Canada's security strategy in the Arctic should avoid repeating past mistakes. Canadian and American militarization of the Arctic during the Second World War left a lasting impact on Inuit and our communities. Major infrastructure projects were completed during this period by the American military in the region, including construction of the Distant Early Warning Line and airport runways at Resolute Bay, Iqaluit, Saglek, and Kuujjuaq.

Militarization served as a precursor to other colonial policies, including residential schooling, forced relocations of Inuit families intended to strengthen Canada's sovereignty claims to the region, and the slaughter of Inuit sled dogs by the RCMP to terminate Inuit mobility.

For example, in the 1950s, 19 Inuit families from Inukjuak, Nunavik, and three families from Pond Inlet, Nunavut, were relocated by the federal government to Resolute Bay and Grise Fiord in the High Arctic for the sole purpose of bolstering Canada's sovereignty claims over the area.

Canada risks falling further behind other Arctic States and inadvertently inviting others to exert economic and political control over its territory and waters. Canada has an opportunity to become a prosperous and powerful Arctic State, with access to critical minerals, energy resources and geopolitically important shipping routes all located in Inuit Nunangat.

The growing importance of Inuit Nunangat and the critical role Inuit play in managing and co-managing its lands and waters need to be reflected in a new policy approach for the region that prioritizes major investments designed to bring it into the rest of the country and recognizes the importance of Inuit knowledge, perspectives and rights.

# Inuit Nunangat

Inuit Nunangat is a geopolitical term developed by Inuit to describe a region of Canada that encompasses Canada's entire Arctic territory. This distinct geographical, cultural, and political space makes up 40 percent of Canada's land area, 72 percent of its coastline (including Canada's entire Arctic coastline) and 35 percent of its surface freshwater. It consists of the Inuvialuit Settlement Region in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik in Northern Quebec, and Nunatsiavut in Northern Labrador. Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., Makivvik, and Nunatsiavut Government are the four Inuit Treaty Organizations and rights holders that collectively represent all Inuit.



*This distinct geographical, cultural, and political space makes up 40 percent of Canada's land area, 72 percent of its coastline (including Canada's entire Arctic coastline) and 35 percent of its surface freshwater.*

Canada is the only Arctic State that has signed comprehensive treaties with an Arctic Indigenous People. The five<sup>1</sup> Inuit-Crown treaties signed with Inuit Treaty Organizations create a solid and predictable foundation for cooperation and partnership and facilitate the management and co-management of vast land and marine areas. While Inuit-Crown treaties recognize the existence of provincial and territorial governments throughout Inuit Nunangat, Inuit continue to form the majority population within the region.

Canada is also the only Arctic State whose elected federal leaders conduct structured work on shared priorities in partnership with an Arctic Indigenous People. Through the Inuit-Crown Partnership Committee (ICPC) established by Inuit and the Crown in 2017, Inuit leaders and federal Cabinet ministers jointly identify priorities and associated deliverables and direct their respective senior officials to complete them. ICPC therefore serves as a uniquely Canadian strategic mechanism for understanding and addressing Arctic priorities, including security priorities.

### **A vulnerable and neglected region**

The circumpolar Arctic is the future. Arctic States are positioning themselves to exert greater control over the region. Russia's bold claims to the continental shelf up to the North Pole, coupled with the United States and Canada's overlapping claims in the Beaufort Sea, are indicative of these developments. Russia, China, the United States and others recognize the value of the Arctic and are aggressively asserting their influence now to secure their respective futures. The recent experience of Greenland demonstrates how vulnerable Inuit Nunangat and Canada may be to foreign interference and coercion if the federal government does not invest more in Inuit and bring the region into the rest of the country.

The current US administration has stated its intention to acquire Greenland, citing Denmark's underinvestment in its economic and military security. The US Government Accountability Office is currently studying the cost of a takeover and ongoing maintenance of Greenland.

<sup>1</sup> Inuvialuit Final Agreement (Inuvialuit Settlement Region); Nunavut Agreement (Nunavut); James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (Nunavik); Nunavik Inuit Land Claims Agreement (Nunavik); Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement (Nunatsiavut).

In addition, the US does not recognize the Northwest Passage as part of Canada's internal waters. As the Northwest Passage becomes a more viable shipping route, Canada should expect increased tensions with the US over the regulation of Arctic shipping. Beyond issues relating to sovereignty, more practical issues such as development of ports for refueling, monitoring and response capacity for ships experiencing emergencies and the accessibility of the Northwest Passage to international vessels, are all issues that will drive tensions with the US and other international actors.

In stark contrast to Canada, Russia has invested heavily in regional shipping, infrastructure, resource extraction, and military infrastructure throughout its Arctic territory. It is partnering with China to increase shipping along the Northern Sea Route. Shipments transiting through Russian waters already dwarf transits of the Canadian Northwest Passage, and without investment in Inuit Nunangat, this gap will grow at an exponential rate in the coming years. As relations warm between the US and Russia, one growing issue of discussion is increased access to the Russian Arctic for US interests.

Just as it does in other regions of the world, China uses infrastructure deficits in the Arctic as strategic footholds to exert influence. China's actions in Greenland offer previews of their behaviour in Inuit Nunangat. China invested US\$2 billion in Greenland between 2012 and 2017. In 2019, a Chinese state-owned company made a failed bid to build two new airports in Nuuk and Ilulissat, Greenland, the largest infrastructure projects in Greenland's history.

Chinese state-owned companies are investors in rare earth element mining projects in Greenland and other parts of the Arctic, including the Canadian Arctic. China's current policy is to broker closer trade ties with Inuit Nunangat. As recently as 2020, a Chinese state-owned company made a failed bid to purchase the Hope Bay gold mine complex near Cambridge Bay.

The historic underinvestment in Inuit Nunangat, combined with recent investments in the Russian Arctic, means that any number of foreign actors may seek to exploit the vast inequities that exist between Inuit Nunangat and the rest of Canada to assert their own interests. Some of those foreign interests could include prohibiting further development of the Arctic, encouraging development pathways and projects that serve foreign interests rather than Canadian interests, using cyber-attacks that exploit vulnerabilities in the region's under-developed technology infrastructure, and leveraging research relationships and investments to gain influence and intelligence.

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### **Vision for sovereignty, security and defence in our homeland**

Inuit have a vision of Inuit Nunangat as the primary driver of growth in the Canadian economy over the coming decades. Access to efficient shipping routes, abundant renewable and non-renewable resources, and geopolitical stability are all features of an Inuit Nunangat that contributes to the rest of Canada.

Inuit use and occupancy of Inuit Nunangat underpins Canada's sovereignty claims to the entirety of the Northwest Passage. Inuit harvesters monitor vast land and marine areas adjacent to our communities that the Canadian Coast Guard and Canadian Armed Forces currently do not have the capacity to monitor or secure. As the foremost experts on the Arctic, our perspectives need to inform Canada's Arctic security policy and Canada needs to partner with Inuit to advance shared priorities for the region.

This partnership is necessary for the ascendancy of Inuit Nunangat within Canada and the ascendancy of Canada as a powerful Arctic State within the international community. The Inuit vision for sovereignty, security and defence is not just a vision for Inuit Nunangat but includes all Canadians: a Canada which is positioned as a central trade corridor linking East and West, as well as North and South. To be effective, Canada's broader national sovereignty, security, and defence objectives must build on the following Inuit priorities:

**Secure the region through Inuit-Crown Partnership:** Continued Inuit-Crown partnership through the Inuit-Crown Partnership Committee is Canada's greatest asset for effectively securing and developing the region. The Government of Canada is the only Arctic State that has a direct working relationship with an Arctic Indigenous People, both bilaterally with each of the four Inuit Treaty Organizations, as well as multilaterally through the Inuit-Crown Partnership Committee. This is a key strength for Canada that it can and should build upon. Continued federal engagement in the Inuit-Crown Partnership Committee is pivotal for Arctic safety, security and defence, enabling Canada to develop more effective policies that are informed by Inuit expertise. The Committee facilitates close cooperation and information sharing between Inuit and federal leaders and has improved federal decision-making, including in relation to federal legislation, programs, policies and initiatives that are intended to benefit the Arctic.

**Invest in Inuit prosperity to improve Arctic security:** Securing the Arctic requires Canada to invest in the people that live here and the services and supports needed to develop the economy. The most tangible threats to Arctic security arise from instances of foreign influence/interference, economic sabotage and increasing inequities between Inuit Nunangat and the rest of Canada. Measures to secure the Arctic must therefore prioritize closing gaps in health, education and social services that compel many families to leave the region and that prevent many from returning, as well as enacting more effective policies for reducing hunger and the high cost of living. Approaches to security and defence that are narrowly focused on establishing a greater military presence in the region, while necessary, respond to threats that are more remote than immediate social and infrastructure vulnerabilities, and jeopardize the economic and political opportunities of a more accessible Arctic.

**Bring Inuit Nunangat into Canada:** Securing the Arctic requires a more ambitious vision for developing the region and integrating its infrastructure and economy into the rest of the country. Canada and Inuit must enact a more ambitious vision for rapidly developing Inuit Nunangat. This vision should be underpinned by an aggressive fiscal policy focused on regional development, rather than project-based development. The current approach by governments of allocating one-off investments for regional priorities keeps Inuit Nunangat marginalized, politically and economically isolated, and socially and economically disadvantaged. Canada must begin preparing now for the new Arctic future, including by developing sea lanes and other supporting infrastructure throughout the Northwest Passage that will be needed to meet increasing shipping demands.

**Invest directly in Inuit:** The federal government has long deferred to provincial and territorial jurisdiction to develop the Arctic. This approach has caused Canada to fall behind all other Arctic States and left Inuit exposed to discrimination and marginalization. Direct federal investments in Inuit Treaty Organizations, coupled with new legislative and policy approaches supporting greater Inuit self-determination over areas such as education, healthcare, food security and housing, is the most efficient and effective means for improving prosperity in the region at a time of increased vulnerability. Achieving these objectives will require the federal government to prioritize and strengthen partnerships with Inuit Treaty Organizations and assert its spending authority over provinces and territories to accelerate these changes.

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**Ensure defence infrastructure investments benefit Inuit:** Arctic infrastructure in Canada trails that of all other Arctic States, making the region expensive, economically distressed, and difficult to access. Canada's defence spending needs to support the region by closing the infrastructure gap between Inuit Nunangat and the rest of the country, spurring growth and development and enabling our people to more safely conduct harvesting activities, monitor the region, and conduct search and rescue. This can be achieved by prioritizing investments in new dual-use infrastructure projects that include housing, new ports, harbours, and docks, support for fibre connectivity projects, roads, and climate change-resistant runways and sea lanes. Dual use infrastructure is needed to support sustainable and robust communities within Inuit Nunangat, as well as to rapidly expand monitoring and regulatory capacity to ensure access to resources and the safety and security of shipping lanes.

The most recent federal government Defence Policy Update, *Our North Strong and Free*, commits to modernizing the NORAD defence systems and recognizes that investing in dual-use infrastructure in the Arctic is necessary to support Canada's sovereignty and security. While we are pleased to finally see this focus, the concept of dual-use infrastructure that is highlighted in these commitments needs to be expanded to truly benefit Inuit communities.

**Address vulnerabilities to foreign interference:** The Canadian Security Intelligence Service warned Inuit leaders in 2023 that foreign adversaries could gain a foothold in Canada by offering to fill infrastructure gaps in the Arctic, yet Canada continues to lack the ambition and vision needed to help us close gaps such as the need for new airport runways, ports harbours and docks, and new roads and fibre connectivity projects. Inuit are therefore in the vulnerable and awkward position of being warned against accepting or soliciting needed investments from others without a clear alternative provided by Canada to remedy the dire infrastructure deficit in the Arctic. Our people already rely on technology provided by private enterprises, such as Space X's Starlink satellite system, because Canada has declined to enact a vision for improving connectivity in Inuit Nunangat. The federal government must work with Inuit to ensure that we do not shoulder the burden of declining these partnerships that could support economic development.

## Notes



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