Heather Nicol and Lassi Heininen provide great insight into our understanding of circumpolar interactions and relations. Therefore, we can better appreciate the evolving cooperative dynamics that have measurable impacts on the main Northern actors. Consequently, our perspective is not reduced to a mere analysis of the impacts southern communities have on the North. As previously stated elsewhere by Gary Wilson, “Inuit peoples have also strengthened their circumpolar and international connections through transnational organizations […] At the same time, increased bilateral relationships between Inuit regions have supplemented and enriched the emerging network of Inuit diplomacy.”

We can decipher a growing strengthening of Nordic ties on an East-West axis within the North in order to reduce the Northern dependency towards the governmental authorities who are based in the South of Nordic countries.

However, I must question two points: first, the importance the authors give to the change they observed in the insertion of the Arctic in Canadian foreign policy after the Cold War, and second, that human security policy is presented as comprehensive security. Concerning the former questioning, I will present how Canadian foreign policy kept its fundamental dynamics, assumptions, and representations in the post-Cold War transition (from military and strategic concerns to environmental, social and economic issues). I will argue that these elements of continuity can be found in the discursive practices of the Canadian government, which frame what is seen as plausible and possible in the foreign policy of a nation. We will come to observe that the projection of national values and identities, as well as the identity construction of a Self (Canada) based on the definition of various Others (in this case, mostly States occupying a Northern territory or interests in the circumpolar world but also Nordic communities), are central and constant dynamics in the Canadian government actions in the circumpolar world.

As for my concern regarding the concept of human security being labelled as comprehensive, I have noted that the authors briefly mention a term than seems crucial to the development of this region and that has implications for their conclusion: the process of securitization. The term is mentioned twice in the article without having been properly conceptualized, which brings the reader to equate securitization with militarization and comprehensive security with a holistic definition of the process of securitization. Although I am in
accordance with the idea that the success of transnational organizations and institutions will depend on a more comprehensive definition of human security within the circumpolar north. I believe that a more inclusive and holistic conception of human security cannot be reconstructed without a prior understanding of the dynamics animating the process of securitization; to do so would involve the risk of reproducing non-emancipatory security policies for the communities living in the region.

Inside, Outside, and … in Between? Canadian Foreign Policy in the Arctic

Public policies concerning the Canadian North cover numerous policy areas (foreign policy, natural resources, defence, Aboriginal communities and transportation among others). However, we will focus on Canadian foreign policy in the North, given that this dimension seems in recent years to have been incorporating other domains under its umbrella.

There is no doubt than the international agenda has been modified near the end of and after the Cold War. I am not questioning this factual point presented by Nicol and Heininen, but rather the authors’ argument that “it is clear that this international North, stemming from an environmental and “scientific” understanding of regionalism, resulted in a new way of structuring policies within the North.” On the contrary, I would argue that, by taking discursive practices seriously and by attributing to them a performative nature in which discourses can frame and represent in a specific way, we come to see the stability, constancy, and permanency of Canadian foreign policy (CFP) in the Arctic instead of postulating that a rupture in CFP occurred at the end of the Cold War.

By doing so, foreign policy can exist as a site for the construction of significations and differences between the inside of the state (a Self) and an external world (Others). In turn, the Self will be defined in contrast with the external world and thus establish the differences that are considered meaningful. This process of differentiation can be positive or negative, but it stands on the projection of identity which, in the case of foreign policy, will favour one component (the Self, Canada) over the Other(s). This discursive practice shapes the elaboration and implementation of the policies by bringing forth a system of acceptable norms, conventions, and signs. This context will contribute afterwards to the stability and permanency of the established practices and discourses. Foreign policy discourses actively construct “how the “foreign” world beyond the border might look to insiders”, especially after the Cold war given that it sparked an interest for initiating new reactions to novel issues and that these initiatives had to be explained to multiple audiences.

To better illustrate my point, I shall comment on “The Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy” document, and how the threats affecting Northern populations are conceptualized within it, as this represents a key component of the document itself. This exercise of defining the threats is centred on external phenomenon, particularly globalisation, climate change and transboundary pollution issues. The performative function of the foreign policy discourse is evident here as the threats to the integrity and the security of the communities all come from the exterior (the Others). This situation has the advantage of concealing the fact that many past, present and future threats are direct consequences of the activities emanating from the Southern populations in Canada and that Canada has been idle on many issues (climate change being the most notable example of this inactivity).
A passage of this document is particularly important in order to grasp the identity-building nature of foreign policy: “A clearly defined Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy will establish a framework to promote the extension of Canadian interests and values” (P.2). The Canadian government policy toward the North is thus taking the very common path of the diffusion and exportation of “Canadian values” to construct communities to its image. A relevant example of this type of practice in the circumpolar world would be the investment coming from the Canadian government for governance and democratic reform projects in Northern Russia. These initiatives helped Canada and Russia’s Nordic communities connect, but if “a new way of structuring policies in the North” can be identified, I think we must pay attention to the transfer of responsibilities from governmental agencies to organizations of the third sector, the oft-cited concept of civil society.

However, we must understand though that this new neo-liberal way of conducting business results in an overstretch for these organizations because these new tasks of providing services and implementing the practical implications of policies on a daily basis come with a price, which is a reduction in the advocacy capability of these organizations. Furthermore, as many critical voices in Canadian foreign policy had outlined (see Sandra Whitworth or Mark Neufeld), the democratisation of CFP has not created a structural change in the formulation and application of CFP. As a former Foreign Affairs minister reminded us, governments still control international processes even though NGOs can influence and stimulate cooperation. On another note, the inclusion of Canadian NGOs in international forum in the 1990s have been made by the Canadian government with the underlying assumption that these NGOs would largely support official Canadian positions and interests.

On a related front, the divide is clearly delineated and the differentiation is established, positive or negative depending on your normative standpoint (it is not the purpose of this article to postulate one) with this key fragment of the Northern dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy, since foreign policy has the goal first and foremost “to enhance the security and prosperity of Canadians” (P.10). This necessity appears in the majority of official foreign policy documents linked to Canadian foreign policy. We do not want to judge the intentions or the instrumentality of such a discursive practice but rather underline the existence of its basic function performed by foreign policy, which is to reify the inside-outside demarcation point.

I agree with Nicol and Heininen on the notion that we are witnessing the construction of a dynamic transnational society. The efforts of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) are geared towards trying to change the colonial logic in order to establish a vibrant transnational society. Nevertheless, the insertion of the North and the Arctic in Canadian foreign policy limits the potential of such development as these practices remain within a statist definition of national sovereignty and international relations, based first and foremost on the primacy of interstate relations as the primary vector of relations between communities. The CFP, even in the heyday of human security in the 1990s, has been more interested in sovereignty issues than anything else. Environmental law protection in the 1970s and economic as well as human development in the 1990s are all closely related, emanating from a governmental necessity to assert sovereignty over territory by asserting control on human population.

Hence, the influence of Nordic communities reaches an important limit, which in turn convinced some analysts to qualify Arctic public policies in Canada and the United States as “policies without a public.” Hence, Nordic policies tend to be dependant of technical experts on numerous
aspects and the process of policy-making tends to be dominated by certain issues. Further, the coherence of policies is very weak between the different sectors (economic, social, environmental, political and cultural for examples). In turn, this dynamic represents an additional obstacle forgotten by the authors in pushing forward notions of sustainable development and human security that are more comprehensive.

Furthermore, although Northerners and especially the indigenous communities living in the North are mentioned, the Northern dimension of Canada’s foreign policy primarily targets all Canadians. The Canadian identity is thus the political and cultural identity that is privileged and the North is portrayed as being capable of unifying the different national communities in Canada. The polar world is framed as an identity label common and widespread among Canadians and, as a consequence, contributes to solidify the frontier between inside and outside the Canadian state with the notion of an imagined community based on principles of territorial nationalism. Securitizations of sovereignty and identity in the North (which have been other elements of constancy since at least 1945) will then come to constrain the potentiality and possibility of a more comprehensive human security concern with regional and local implications.

The Dynamics of Securitisation and Human Security

The conceptualisation of securitization constitutes an imperative first step at (re)imagining a more comprehensive understanding of Arctic security. However, the term “securitization” is mentioned only twice in the article, in ambiguous contexts. The authors seem to associate securitization exclusively to a militaristic or sovereignty-based orientation or to a set of actions and claims. Securitization is thus contrasted in the article with “broader environmental and economic agendas.”

At this point, it seems constructive to come back to the origins of the concept of securitization as defined by Buzan, Waever and de Wilde. Hence, securitization is about the “intersubjective establishment of an existential threat”, on which exceptional measures can be taken to protect a population, a society and an audience to which we addressed our discourse while searching legitimisation for it. Securitization could thus be closely associated to the sovereign power and the power to define threats, while extended powers and responsibilities are associated with the actor who is considered as the protector (usually the State). This threat definition exercise turns into worst case interpretations since securitizing perceives existential threats: capabilities become a possibility that threatens the very existence of the entity that is supposed to be protected.

First and foremost, we recognize the role of the audience in the securitization effort. Who is to be convinced by the securitization discourses? Who is the source of legitimization that the securitizing actors are appealing to? As discussed in the first part of this article, the discourses are oriented to a Canadian audience in general, primarily referring to all Canadians and secondly to Northerners and Aboriginal peoples living in the North. To quote Rob Huebert, the goal is “to ensure that this region remains protected and promoted for all Canadians, including those that call it home.” A similar reference could be seen in the Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy. The term “policies without publics” evoked earlier further finds the resonance of a dispersed audience without a high level of coherence.

From that perspective, environmental and economic agendas can be securitized and can thus follow the same
path of threat definition than military or sovereignty issues. Hence, this brings us to the issue of what is being securitized and what are the referent objects of security. In that regard, we can observe that sovereignty is a recurring theme and an omnipresent referent object. As Buzan et al note, sovereignty is the most frequent referent object in the military and political sectors but in the Arctic, we can also point out than environmental and economic concerns are tied to a sovereignty-assertion discourse and to the politics of protection from the Canadian government.

Hence, we denote a simultaneous process of establishing what Michel Foucault has called a territorial pact and the process of biopolitics/biopower in the Canadian Arctic. The former can generally be attributed to a territorial control and ownership over a territory while establishing the basis for the exclusive right to govern for a state entity. In this view, the territory is protected from outsiders wanting to capture or intrude on the space in question, whereas the process of biopolitics is associated with a control over life and “a control over populations”, which is a displacement from a “right to kill” to “the power to make live” for the authorities. These simultaneous constructions and processes in the Arctic include health, ecosystems and economic issues in the sovereignty-assertion of the Canadian government. The control over populations does not solely include the coercive dimension, but also the management of life since “biopower creates the health and welfare of the population as a properly political problem.” This double dynamic can indeed be seen more acutely in the recuperation of security concerns and threats after September 11th 2001, where the Arctic frontier was framed as a border susceptible of being exploited by rogue transnational elements that could get access to North America by the weakly defended Northern front. This territorial/human securitization could thus be perceived as yet another sign of continuity (and not rupture) in the Canadian actions in the region. It can also guide us on the deficiency encountered in the implementation of a truly comprehensive human security in the Arctic. Wanting to see if the human security concept in the Canadian North (originally designed on the international stage) could be translated and applied in a domestic setting is quite a legitimate concern. This questioning is relevant since the concept of human security has been partially concretized in the Canadian foreign policy and in international initiatives. Hence, the preoccupations of providing freedom from fear and freedom from want have received mitigated answers, responding very easily to the former (for example, the small arms initiatives, the landmines treaty and the International Criminal Court) but almost ignoring the latter.

Therefore, we encounter a high level of difficulty in addressing freedom from want concerns in other countries. We postulate that this difficulty springs from the inherent necessary changes in the wealth distribution and the modification of power relations in favour of underdeveloped or fragile peoples, whether there is mention of international or domestic human security initiatives. Seen from this perspective, we understand that human security is more about assuring order in underdeveloped communities where we introduce disruptive elements of modernity. Human security is thus associated closely with the need for societal order. As Duffield puts it, the interconnection between development and security can be seen as a recurrent and episodic strategisation of power in which securing self-reliant species-life and maintaining its cohesion is essential for the defence of mass society and international order.
Moreover, the quest for a freedom from want coherent framework in Canada seems farther now then ever before if we consider recent governance and citizenship regime modifications. Hence, if the 1943 Speeches from the Throne declared that “it is in the general interest that freedom from fear and from want should be the assured possession of all,” neoliberal governance practices have changed this dynamic to intervene only in a reactive way to mitigate the negative consequences of development and modernization in or touching the North.

Securitization and securitizing discourses are thus a much more complex and encompassing phenomena than a contrast between traditional security (military, state sovereignty) and comprehensive security (economic, cultural, and environmental). The securitization in the Arctic is about sovereignty, but that process is as much about control over the territory as it is about the control over life. The management of the Arctic region is a prime example of this dual dynamic, which can be seen in the construction of the Canadian sovereignty case in the Arctic as well as in the construction of threats and fears in the region. The control of life is also a concept that is applicable to the regulation of flows going through this region as well as to characteristic of the protection relation established by the Canadian government and society towards the Northern communities.

Is an Emancipatory Security Possible?

In conclusion, the examination of foreign policy and the construction of securitization helps us to better evaluate the potential for cooperation in the Arctic. I am less hopeful on the potential of transnational organizations and institutions than Nicol and Heininen, given that these actors are greatly dependant on resources, status and legitimacy on government agencies and experts.

After having briefly analyzed the process of securitization, we can see that the concept of security includes a definition of existential threats, the prevalence of worst-case scenarios and a framing of how the politics of protection must be articulated between the securitizing actors and the community to be protected. Therefore, it is difficult to perceive a possibility to design a more comprehensive human security. However, the answer might lie in a reformulating of the central referent object in the Arctic: sovereignty. As put forward by Franklyn Griffiths, a concept of sovereignty based on the principle of stewardship could be a solution, in the sense of caretaking or Kanuentamun for the Innu.

An even more significant advancement would be to direct an Arctic policy directly addressed to Northerners and to consider further changes in the power relations with the Aboriginal communities living in the North. This proposition needs in turn to be implemented in concrete practices but also in discourses and conceptions of security, in order to not reproduce the same dynamics and to not give the impression of transformation when elements of continuity are dominating the picture. A genuine desecuritizing effort would begin by connecting the production of insecurity by the Canadian state and the southern population in Canada to the discursive and non-discursive practices concerning the North. A human security agenda addressing threats coming from outside the borders while ignoring the production of threats from within (as in the case of climate change) does little toward a more comprehensive human security for the Northern communities. This dynamic is aggravated by the fact that the Canadian government’s dominant governance conception has recently shifted to focalizing on the fact that we must “look for local solutions to local problems.”
There exists a necessity to connect the different levels and to search further for the root causes in the production of insecurities in order to address them in a comprehensive fashion. The insertion of the Arctic in the Canadian Foreign Policy seems an opportunity to close our eyes once again on the role of Canadians and of the Canadian government in the production of insecurities in the North while reinforcing a clear dividing line between what is inside and outside the Canadian state. Indeed, the Canadian Foreign Policy in the Arctic tends to reinforce North-South dynamics and a dichotomy between Self-Other instead of promoting a true transnational community. The human security enterprise coupled with constant nation-building visions for the North in Canada threatened to bring the same kind of insecurities that the construction of the modern Western state brought to Aboriginal people. The nation-building project also brings impediments to local and regional cooperation that the authors are concerned with. In this sense, contrarily to Nicol and Heininen, we see more continuity than rupture in the Canadian actions and discourses concerning the Arctic, the basic dynamics of foreign policy and securitization staying intact.

1The author would like to thank Rachel Côté for her pertinent comments.


4Nicol and Heininen, “Networking the North”, 23.

5Nicol and Heininen, “Networking the North”, 21.


7Paul Chilton, Analysing Political Discourse – Theory and Practice (New York, Routledge, 2004), 137-139.


For a proposition about the national identity potential of the North, see Franklyn Griffiths, *A Northern Foreign Policy* (Canadian Institute of International Affairs, Toronto, 1979).


See for a relevant demonstration of such a discourse, Michael Byers, *Intent for a Nation* (Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre, 2007), 152-172.


