Cold Frontiers: Arctic North America and the Politics of Frozen Lands

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Introduction

The Arctic of North America is not an empty expanse at the top of the map but a textured world of kinship, travel, subsistence, and law. Its sea ice advances and retreats with the seasons, shaping where people move, what they eat, how they trade, and the meanings they give to place. The region’s seemingly simple geography—ice, ocean, tundra—conceals a dense web of relationships among human communities, animals, winds, currents, and institutions. This book argues that to understand the politics of these frozen lands, we must begin with the people who have always called them home and with the materiality of ice itself: a changing medium that conditions both daily life and statecraft.

Indigenous societies—Inuit across Alaska, Arctic Canada, and Greenland; Iñupiat, Yupik, and Inuvialuit communities; and neighboring First Nations such as Gwich’in and Dene—have developed finely tuned systems of knowledge and governance suited to living with variability. Practices often grouped under Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit are not artifacts of the past but living frameworks for navigation, hunting, stewardship, and social responsibility. They are indispensable for interpreting environmental signals, anticipating risk, and organizing collective action. Throughout the following chapters, Indigenous voices, institutions, and priorities anchor the discussion, challenging familiar narratives that treat the Arctic as peripheral or unpeopled.

Yet the Arctic is also a world profoundly shaped by colonial exploration and state ambition. European expeditions mapped coastlines and channels, traders and missionaries built posts and schools, and governments drew borders that rarely aligned with Indigenous mobility and governance. The legacy of relocations, residential schooling, and administrative consolidation continues to reverberate in health, housing, and education outcomes. At the same time, communities have pressed for self-determination, negotiated land claim agreements, and built innovative co-management regimes that complicate any simple story of domination or decline.

Resource politics have repeatedly recast the region. Waves of interest in whaling, fur, oil and gas, minerals, fisheries, and now critical minerals have brought capital-intensive projects, jobs, and infrastructure—alongside social disruption, environmental risk, and difficult questions about who benefits and who bears costs. Sea-ice change has revived debates over shipping, search and rescue, and environmental protection, particularly in contested straits and archipelagos. Throughout, a central theme is the asymmetry between the temporality of investment cycles and the longer arcs of community well-being and ecological resilience.

Sovereignty in the Arctic is more than flags and maps; it is a practice emerging from

everyday safety on the land and water, jurisdictional claims to shelves and straits, and the institutions that mediate cooperation and conflict. The book traces how international law, especially the Law of the Sea, intersects with national priorities, Indigenous rights, and the work of regional bodies such as the Arctic Council. It also examines the return of great-power competition and renewed militarization, set against enduring cross-border cooperation in search and rescue, science, and environmental monitoring.

Climate change is the unavoidable context for every contemporary discussion in the North. Rapid warming, permafrost thaw, and diminishing multi-year sea ice are altering travel routes, undermining infrastructure, transforming habitats, and reshaping food systems. Communities are adapting—reviving travel skills, redesigning housing, building local monitoring networks, and asserting stewardship through Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas and other co-management tools. Adaptation here is not resignation; it is a claim to continuity, safety, and authority over the terms of change.

This book advances a simple proposition: the future of Arctic North America will be decided not only in courtrooms, boardrooms, and war rooms, but also on the ice and in community halls where knowledge is shared, decisions are made, and responsibilities are shouldered. By pairing histories of exploration and state formation with contemporary debates over energy, minerals, shipping, and conservation, the chapters that follow show how governance can be both deeply local and unavoidably global.

The narrative unfolds in twenty-five chapters that move from foundations—landscapes, lifeways, and knowledge—through colonial and Cold War entanglements, to today’s resource politics, legal regimes, security dynamics, and community-led conservation. While the book covers national frameworks in the United States, Canada, and Greenland, it treats the Arctic first as a lived region whose politics are inseparable from Indigenous adaptation and authority. The aim is neither to romanticize nor to pathologize the North, but to center the people and places that make its politics both distinctive and instructive for a warming world.

CHAPTER ONE: The Living North: Landscapes and Peoples

A good map of the North American Arctic lies like a held breath. Look north on most paper and the world seems to thin out, turning a pale blue or a blank white. Yet in reality, the region is dense with place-names, pathways, ice types, and people whose movements have long intersected with the rhythms of cold. From Bering Strait to Baffin Bay, from the Brooks Range to the coasts of Labrador, the Arctic is not a single edge but a series of edges—sea and land, ice and open water, tundra and taiga, village and outpost—each with its own logic and tempo.

To speak of Arctic North America is to name places with overlapping labels and legacies. Alaska stretches from temperate rainforests to barrier islands adrift in sea ice. Yukon and the Northwest Territories hold broad river valleys and the Mackenzie Delta, where freshwater meets the Beaufort Sea. Nunavut, vast and island-dotted, arcs across the top of the continent. Nunatsiavut, on Labrador’s coast, and Nunavik, in northern Quebec, round out the Inuit regions of eastern Canada, while Greenland, a continent-sized island with self-governance, shares kinship ties across the Davis Strait. These are not simply jurisdictions; they are lifeworlds shaped by distinct geographies and histories.

The Arctic Ocean is the region’s beating heart, and sea ice is its defining skin. Each autumn and winter, pack ice advances, thickening and rafting into ridges; each spring and summer, it retreats, opening leads and polynyas where water and life stir. The ice is not a flat lid but a moving terrain of floes, pressure ridges, and thinning leads. Multi-year ice, once common, has become scarce, while seasonal ice now forms later and breaks earlier. For people who travel, hunt, and camp on ice, these changes are not abstractions—they are decisions about where it is safe to go and when to turn back.

On land, tundra—low shrubs, mosses, lichens, and a layer of permafrost—stretches across the continental north. Permafrost, ground that remains frozen for at least two consecutive years, underpins the stability of buildings, roads, and airstrips. It also stores carbon and, as it warms, can thaw unevenly, creating thermokarst pits, slumping riverbanks, and altered drainage. Farther south, taiga—the boreal forest of spruce and larch—closes in along river corridors and uplands, offering timber, berries, and habitat. The treeline is not a neat boundary but a shifting mosaic that hunters, herders, and trappers know intimately.

Water is never far from the story. Great rivers—the Mackenzie, the Yukon, the Colville, the Thelon—funnel snowmelt and rainfall to the coast, building deltas and shaping

currents. Lakes glint across the Low Arctic, some clear and cold, others murky with thawed permafrost. Glaciers slide from the Greenland Ice Sheet and from mountain icefields, calving into fjords and feeding cold, fresh plumes into the ocean. In Beringia, the broad shelf between Alaska and Siberia, shallow seas mix nutrient-rich waters that sustain fisheries and feed marine mammals moving along seasonal routes.

The region’s climate is not uniform. The high Arctic—places like Resolute, Alert, and northern Greenland—experiences months of polar night, bitter cold, and wind that sculpts sastrugi on the ice surface. The Low Arctic, including communities like Inuvik, Kuujjuaq, and Iqaluit, has longer summer days, shrub tundra, and seasonal sea ice that may be navigable for parts of the year. Maritime influences matter: the Bering Sea moderates temperatures on Alaska’s west coast; the Labrador Current cools the eastern Arctic; the Beaufort Sea’s ice cover can vary dramatically with prevailing winds. Local topography—mountains, fjords, peninsulas—creates microclimates where weather can change within hours.

This is also a region of animals whose lives are pegged to ice and season. Polar bears use sea ice to hunt seals. Walrus haul out on ice and shore to rest. Ringed and bearded seals birth and rear pups in snow caves on ice. Caribou and reindeer migrate across tundra and through forest edges, timing movements to forage and avoid insects. Arctic char and other fish run through rivers. Migratory birds—geese, loons, murres—arrive in spring to breed and feed, while seabirds winter over open leads or follow currents south. Each species sets its own tempo; humans tune to it.

The first human presence in the North American Arctic dates to ancient migrations across Beringia, when lower sea levels exposed a land bridge between Asia and Alaska. Paleoenvironmental records suggest that as ice sheets retreated and sea levels rose, people adapted to new coastlines and shifting resources. Archaeological sites—coastal shell middens, inland campsites, and stone tool assemblages—document waves of movement and innovation. The peopling of the Arctic was not a single wave but a long process of exploration, settlement, and return.

The ancestors of today’s Inuit arrived in the last millennium, traveling east from Alaska and bringing a suite of technologies well suited to sea ice hunting: the toggle harpoon, the umiak and kayak, fur clothing designed for flexibility and warmth, and dog sleds. Their expansions, often framed as the Thule culture, followed whales and sea mammals along coasts and through straits, adapting to local conditions as they went. In places, they met and sometimes absorbed earlier populations, such as the Dorset, whose archaeological traces remain in tool styles and seasonal camps.

Indigenous communities across the North include not only Inuit but also Iñupiat in Alaska, Yupik in western Alaska and Siberia, and Inuvialuit in the western Canadian Arctic. In the interior, Gwich’in, Hän, and other Athabaskan peoples have long lived along rivers and migratory routes. To the east, Dene and Cree communities occupy

forest-tundra interfaces. These are distinct cultures with different languages, governance structures, and subsistence practices, yet they share knowledge of the land and water, seasonal cycles, and networks of trade and kinship that make the Arctic a deeply interconnected region.

Place-names in Indigenous languages carry ecological and navigational information. In Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun, names describe currents, ice types, winds, and the behavior of animals. A single name can mark a channel where ice tends to open first in spring, or a hill that signals safe camping when storms blow from the north. These toponyms are not static labels but mental maps updated with experience. They form a dataset of observation, passed along routes and across generations, that remains essential to travel safety and to the social memory of place.

European exploration brought new maps, new terms, and new ambitions. Norse voyagers reached Greenland a thousand years ago, leaving ruins and a legacy of contact that would later be revisited. Explorers like Martin Frobisher, John Davis, and Henry Hudson probed the eastern Arctic in search of a Northwest Passage to Asia, often misreading ice and currents. Their charts introduced names like Baffin Bay and Hudson Strait, while Indigenous guides corrected course and translated local conditions. Contact was uneven: sometimes cooperative, sometimes coercive, always consequential.

The fur trade and whaling extended networks of exchange into the Arctic. Trading posts—Hudson’s Bay Company posts along inland rivers and coastal stations—linked local hunters to global commodity chains. Whale oil, baleen, and later pelts fueled economies that reshaped seasonal rounds and social organization. Missionaries arrived alongside traders, building schools and churches that introduced new languages, beliefs, and authority structures. These institutions provided services and sought converts, but they also disrupted Indigenous governance, knowledge transmission, and family life.

Twentieth-century governance brought formal borders to a region where mobility had long been the norm. Canada’s creation of the Northwest Territories, followed by the establishment of Nunavut, and the drawing of Alaska’s boundaries, aligned poorly with migration routes and hunting territories. Communities found themselves divided by administrative lines and subject to different laws and policies. Relocation programs—such as the move of Inuit communities in the Canadian Arctic—altered settlement patterns and access to traditional hunting grounds. Boarding and residential schools sought to assimilate children, with lasting impacts on language, identity, and well-being.

Through the latter half of the twentieth century, the Arctic became a site of strategic interest. Military bases, radar lines, and airfields were built as part of Cold War defense networks, often with little regard for local land use. Oil and gas exploration

accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by major pipeline projects. Commercial fisheries developed in some regions; mining operations expanded in others. These projects promised jobs and infrastructure but also brought pollution, competition for wildlife, and tensions over land and resource rights.

The last decades have seen significant shifts toward Indigenous self-determination. Land claims agreements in Canada—such as the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, and the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement—established co-management boards, recognized hunting rights, and created new territorial structures. In Alaska, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act organized regional and village corporations, providing land and a framework for economic development. While these systems vary, they share an emphasis on negotiated rights and shared governance, marking a departure from earlier top-down control.

Contemporary geopolitics in the Arctic is shaped by climate change and the opening of new possibilities and risks. Thinning sea ice has renewed debates over shipping routes, including the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route. New access brings opportunities for transport and resource extraction, but also hazards: ice conditions remain unpredictable, search and rescue capacity is limited, and environmental stakes are high. Sovereignty claims over extended continental shelves under the Law of the Sea intersect with Indigenous rights and international law, adding complexity to decisions about who can do what, where.

Energy and mineral politics animate the present. Renewed interest in oil and gas, critical minerals essential to modern technology, and rare earth elements has drawn investment and strategic planning to the North. At the same time, the costs of Arctic development—financial, social, and environmental—are substantial. Communities weigh benefits against potential impacts on wildlife, water, and health. Co-management bodies and Indigenous organizations increasingly influence permitting and monitoring, while legal challenges and shifting markets shape the pace and scale of projects.

Climate change is not a future scenario but a daily reality. Permafrost thaw affects building foundations, roads, and airstrips. Coastal erosion threatens communities located along low-lying shorelines. Sea ice variability alters hunting seasons and travel safety. Wildlife distribution is shifting as species track temperature and food availability. Indigenous knowledge and scientific monitoring together provide tools to understand these changes and to adapt—through revised travel practices, updated infrastructure designs, and stewardship initiatives that prioritize ecosystem resilience.

The Arctic is also a place of creativity and renewal. Artists, storytellers, and filmmakers from the North are reshaping representation, moving beyond stereotypes to portray the complexity of contemporary life and the richness of Indigenous knowledge.

Language revitalization programs, community-led research partnerships, and youth programs are strengthening cultural continuity and capacity. New technologies—satellite broadband, drones, mobile apps—are being integrated with traditional skills to support navigation, safety, and environmental observation. In these ways, the North is not simply reacting to change but actively shaping it.

There is a misconception that the Arctic is empty, a frontier waiting for human history to arrive. The reality is a living North, populated by communities whose histories stretch back millennia and whose futures are being negotiated every day in community halls, on hunting trails, in boardrooms, and in courtrooms. The ice is not a barrier but a road; the tundra is not barren but productive; the cold is not an absence but a presence—organized, demanding, and generative. Understanding the politics of frozen lands means paying attention to the people who know them best and to the conditions that make life possible there.

Another misconception is that the Arctic is isolated from global systems. In fact, it is woven into the world economy through commodity prices, shipping routes, and strategic competition, and into global ecology through climate feedbacks that affect sea levels and weather far beyond the polar circle. The region’s future will be shaped by choices made in distant capitals, but also by choices made in villages and regional assemblies. This book takes the view that to understand the politics of the Arctic, one must begin with its landscapes and peoples, and follow the threads that connect local knowledge to global forces.

In the chapters that follow, we will move from the foundations of lifeways and knowledge to the histories of exploration, colonization, and state formation, and then to the contemporary arenas of resource development, law, security, and conservation. We will encounter whale hunters and satellite operators, trappers and treaty negotiators, caribou researchers and shipping planners. We will visit places where ice dictates the schedule and places where schedules now compress the ice. This chapter sets the stage by describing the living North as it is: a set of places, relationships, and possibilities that are always in motion.

Consider the everyday decision-making in a coastal community like Tuktoyaktuk, where residents watch wind, tide, and ice charts before heading out to check lines or hunt. In Nunavik, hunters read snow texture and the sound of frost to judge whether a route is safe. In western Alaska, Yupik fishers track salmon runs and ocean temperatures as they plan summer subsistence activities. These are not quaint habits; they are rigorous practices of observation and judgment that keep people safe and feed families. They are also the basis for cooperation and trust, which are essential in a region where conditions can change quickly and help is often distant.

Governments and institutions have responded to the Arctic’s distinct environment with tailored policies, though results vary. Environmental assessments, shipping

regulations, and protected area designations attempt to balance development and protection. Co-management boards created under land claims bring Indigenous voices into wildlife decisions. The Arctic Council—intergovernmental but with Permanent Participants representing Indigenous organizations—facilitates cooperation on environmental protection and sustainable development. These institutions are imperfect, but they reflect a shift from unilateral control to shared responsibility.

Infrastructure patterns reveal the region’s duality. Airstrips link communities to the south; ice roads connect towns during winter; port facilities are limited and seasonal. Housing is often designed for cold, but warming temperatures challenge traditional building techniques and require new approaches. Energy systems rely on diesel in many places, though solar, wind, and small hydro are gaining traction. Broadband expansion is improving connectivity, enabling telehealth, education, and new economic opportunities. The shape of infrastructure, like the shape of the ice, influences what is possible.

Wildlife management demonstrates the intersection of knowledge systems. In the Beaufort Sea region, co-management committees bring together Inuvialuit harvesters and scientists to set quotas for bowhead whales. In Greenland, polar bear management combines local observations with satellite tracking. Caribou herds—such as the Porcupine and Bathurst—cross international and territorial boundaries, requiring multi-jurisdictional approaches and respect for Indigenous stewardship. These efforts underscore a key theme: effective management depends on relationships as much as regulations.

The Arctic’s position in global politics is complex. The United States, Canada, and Denmark (via Greenland) are Arctic states with extensive coastlines; Russia controls a vast Arctic territory; the five Nordic states have deep regional ties. The melting of sea ice has drawn attention to new shipping corridors and resource frontiers, as well as to security concerns. Yet the Arctic remains largely cooperative, with the Arctic Council and other forums promoting dialogue. The challenge is to maintain collaboration in the face of strategic competition and to ensure that Indigenous rights are not overshadowed by great-power calculations.

Energy transitions add another layer. As the world moves toward decarbonization, the Arctic’s role is shifting. Some fossil fuel projects are advancing; others are stalled by cost, regulation, or social license. Renewables are being explored in northern communities, where microgrids and battery storage offer new resilience. Shipping routes could shorten transit times but raise risks of spills and black carbon emissions on ice and snow. The decisions made now will shape the region’s economy and ecology for decades, and Indigenous communities are increasingly central to those choices.

It is tempting to see the Arctic as a remote edge of the world, but the Arctic sees itself

as the center of many worlds. For the people who live there, the region is a daily environment of family, work, food, and culture. For scientists, it is a critical component of the global climate system. For strategists, it is a space of access and influence. For conservationists, it is a refuge for biodiversity. For all of us, it is a reminder that extremes are not empty—they are full of life, law, and possibility.

From the first steps onto sea ice to the last light of the polar summer, the North American Arctic defies simple narratives. It is a place of resilience and vulnerability, continuity and change, cooperation and conflict. By beginning with landscapes and peoples—how ice moves, how tundra breathes, how communities organize—we can read the region’s politics not as an abstract map of lines and claims, but as a living network of relationships, responsibilities, and adaptations. The chapters that follow trace these networks, showing how the future of the frozen lands is being written, together, by those who live there and by the world that is increasingly drawn to their shores.

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