

HSPI Commentary Series

NEXT GENERATION NATIONAL SECURITY

HSPI Commentary 06
Friday, September 11, 2009
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Emerging from a deep freeze, the Arctic is now “hot” in more ways than one.

In Canada, the federal government is directing billions towards polar patrol and other measures. This summer, Canadian forces engaged in multi-week military exercises to demonstrate sovereignty in the north. “Use it or lose it” underlies government policy.¹

Meanwhile during what is usually a sleepy part of August, a Homeland Security Subcommittee of the US Senate Committee on Appropriations held hearings in Alaska on the strategic importance of the Arctic. Coast Guard Commandant Thad Allen testified on the matter.

Academics too are looking north. James R. Lee for example argues in a recent article titled “A brief history of climate change and conflict,” that “[i]n the polar zone, conflict is episodic; wars come and go with changes in temperature.”²

This conclusion looms in the background to a recent New York Times editorial which observed that “proponents of climate change legislation have now settled on a new strategy: warning that global warming poses a serious threat to national security.”³

This proposition, even if not yet fully accepted across the board, is significant. Before 9/11, national security was defined in comparatively narrow terms. For instance the idea that health-related matters intersect in many and meaningful ways with security was not as fully appreciated as now.

¹ <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=1908833>

² <http://www.thebulletin.org/print/web-edition/features/brief-history-of-climate-change-and-conflict>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/18/opinion/18tue1.html?hpw=&pagewanted=print>



On the eighth anniversary of the attacks of September 11th, it is worth taking stock of just how far we have come. Over and above changes in policies, procedures, and so on, our mindset and conceptual parameters have evolved and adapted.

Granted, some have suggested that there is still a long way to go. Yet coming to grips with climate change and its security implications is as future-oriented a challenge as any. This would be a good place to demonstrate thoughtful leadership and build further on the advances made to date.

The range of stakeholders here is extensive. Just last month the Young Leaders' Summit on Northern Climate Change convened in Inuvik, Northwest Territories. The future of the north against the background of climate change, and the nexus with security, featured on the agenda.

At year's end in Copenhagen, the United Nations climate change conference will try to conclude a comprehensive agreement to reduce global emissions. With less than a hundred days to go, we will soon see whether the skeptics who are cool to the concept of global warming and its implications will trump.

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