Briefing Note

Nation-to-Nation Co-Governance in the Arctic: Lessons from the Sahtu

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The Delá Got'ıne, currently referred to as Behdzi Ahda First Nation, are in the final stages of negotiating a self-government agreement with the Government of Canada and the Government of Northwest Territories. The following briefing note discusses issues of Arctic governance and security from the perspectives of Nicole Bulger and David Codzi based on their research and working relationship on the Delá Got'ıne Self-Government Agreement.

Introduction

The Delá Got'ıne have been living in the Sahtu region of what is currently known as the Northwest Territories for millennia, and they have governed themselves until recent colonial imposition. They currently live in Colville Lake/Beragút'one Túé, located approximately 50km north of the Arctic Circle. Despite recent experiences of colonial control, the Delá Got'ıne continue to hunt, fish, and carry forward their traditional ways of life. They are currently finalizing a self-government agreement, which will ensure they can continue governing themselves according to their culture and community direction well into the future. While the Delá Got'ıne Self-Government Agreement is a path for self-determination and cultural continuity for the Delá Got'ıne, it is also an opportunity to advance effective governance in the Arctic.

When considering Arctic governance and Arctic security, policy decisions made through and with Indigenous governance arrangements and Indigenous participation increase effectiveness and legitimacy. Whether through the lenses of national security, global security, or climate change, Indigenous governments are necessary partners with unique and lived knowledge of the context for policy implementation. Indigenous Nations have been governing since long before Canada was established, and they continue to do so. Indigenous governments entered into partnerships

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through signing Treaties and established and sustained trade and economic cooperation through numerous agreements with respect to overlapping jurisdictions; such arrangements continue today.

The regional context of the North is unique, and every Indigenous Nation is different. For instance, the Delá Got'ıne have a relatively small government with roughly 41,000km2 of land to look after (82,000km2 when looking at co-governance in K'asho Got'ine); this is land roughly the size of Switzerland and Austria respectively. Colville Lake is isolated, located 120km away from the nearest community, which means they are forced to independently resolve most of the issues they face (presently, with limited resources and jurisdictional authorities). The community is only accessible by air or winter road, and essential services such as policing, health professionals such as doctors and nurses, and other essential workers may take days to arrive in the community to address urgent situations. This means that the best way to respond to security issues – whether it is personal, community, regional, or even national security – is to empower the Delá Got'ıne to be proactive and first responders.

Building Capacity

Delá Got'ıne leaders have said that they have the desire and the knowledge to anticipate and respond to issues in the community, but they lack resources and authorities. The self-government agreement being negotiated provides jurisdiction and authorities that will enable capacity development essential to achieve this goal. It does not make sense for a government hundreds of kilometers away (e.g., Yellowknife is 790km away) to be responsible for monitoring or responding to the needs of the Delá Got'ıne. Not only do present arrangements in this regard reflect colonial policy shortcomings: it is simply not practical. Emergency fire management provides one such example. Delá Got'ıne leadership assert that it makes more sense for them to monitor for forest fires and have the equipment and training to respond to potential fires since they live on that land. They are also the ones travelling and hunting on that land and would be able to spot a fire sooner than anyone else. If the Delá Got'ıne are properly funded and resourced, they can build capacity for emergency forest fire management and emergency response. Taking such an approach could provide insight and methods replicable across other isolated northern communities and indicate specific benefits as well as limitations to addressing this clear need. This practical example highlights the benefits of building Delá Got'ıne capacity to respond to security needs in the region, as well as for themselves.

Sustainable, legitimate, and effective Arctic security requires support for community-led building and maintenance of infrastructure in the North. For example, investment in Northern airports (e.g., paving runways) and building all-season roads as a basis for creating and expanding reliable transportation networks will have multifaceted positive impacts on the economy and society. Such investment increases the security of Northern communities while increasing Canadian capacity broadly (e.g., economic development and trade, military presence, and environmental monitoring).

Self-government offers opportunities for Arctic security on individual, community, and national levels. When Indigenous governments are adequately funded and able to direct their funding based on community needs and priorities, they can address individual and community security and wellness. When Indigenous governments are self-governing, they are able to address these concerns in ways that avoid the "red tape": policies of other governments that act as barriers to solutions and are non-responsive to long-standing and emerging crises. Instead, self-governing

Indigenous governments can create localized solutions to localized needs and respond to needs immediately without waiting for federal or provincial/territorial approval. It is well documented that when individuals' needs are met, community wellness and security are increased (Greenwood et al., 2015; Reading & Wien, 2009). This leads to better socioeconomic outcomes and communities that are contributors to a more productive economy.

Having a more productive economy would highlight the importance of investing in Northern communities. There are many misconceptions that are held by Canadians about the financial status of Indigenous Peoples. The Delá Got'ıne have lived in the Sahtú long before Canada was established, and they, like other First Nations, decided to share their land with the Crown. The revenues from Delá Got'ıne land were used to establish Canada, but there is little to no recognition of that contribution. Moreover, the Crown failed to follow through on their Treaty 11 obligations, such as not establishing reserves in the NWT and the commitment to ensure the way of life of signatories would go unaffected by settlement; the Delá Got'ıne continue to suffer the consequences of Canada's failures to uphold its Treaty obligations. Similarly, the Sahtú Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement has seen uneven implementation, and significant disagreements over Canada failing to live up to its obligations under that modern treaty.

The Delá Got'ıne recognize that they are part of a larger national and global system. They understand that even with self-government, they will be contributors to the national and global economies through their purchases of food, supplies, equipment, machinery, etc. The Delá Got'ıne desire economic development, and they must be recognized as equal economic partners and treated with respect, on a nation-to-nation basis.

Sovereignty

There was, and is, a threat to Indigenous sovereignty in the form of Canadian and global policies. For instance, there are many attempts to secure resources in the Arctic by Canada and other countries without proper free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) despite a federal law implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. There are also plans for an increased Canadian military presence in the North to maintain its own sovereignty. With the United States' current administration, Canadians are sensitive to the need to increase security in the Arctic, which is currently an area vulnerable to incursions from several other nations (such as Russia, China and the USA). An increasingly destabilized world order has increased Canadians' willingness to support sustained buildup of a military presence in the Canadian Arctic. Further, the Canadian government has been able to quickly pass legislation such as Bill C-5 to fast-track major infrastructure and resource projects of "national importance" which calls into question the level of Indigenous consultation pre- and post-policy implementation.

While some attacks on Indigenous sovereignty are obvious and direct, others are harder to notice. In Colville Lake, a lot of news is received through social media, and people are not always aware of what "news" is true. This becomes increasingly difficult with AI video technology, which often looks hyper-realistic. Delá Got'ıne members have noticed trends where social media accounts share misinformation about Indigenous populations to the Canadian public or vice versa. Some members wonder if there is a larger motive behind these accounts or if it is simply the algorithm. Misinformation is rampant and has a negative impact on the lives of people in the North.

Moving Forward

A consistent message coming from the Delá Got'ıne is that building strength and capacity in the community is a collaborative effort that benefits all Canadians, and the Delá Got'ıne want a better future for everyone. Division among groups of people within communities, regions, or territory, stagnates growth. The Delá Got'ıne are invested in relationship building with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments, and the leadership wants to create a better life for everyone and everything around them, which includes the land and animals. The Delá Got'ıne are committed to being good partners in co-governance now and into the future.

In Canada, securing the Arctic effectively must be done in partnership with Indigenous governments, on a nation-to-nation basis. Indigenous governments have a long history of efficiently and legitimately governing themselves and their lands, and they have invaluable knowledge that can be shared. When Canada makes policy decisions without Indigenous collaboration and consultation, it not only violates inherent and Treaty rights, but the policies often fail to be successful and are met with resistance. To secure the Arctic, individual and community needs and priorities of residents should be a starting point for decision making and actions toward a secure and sovereign Arctic.

References

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