

# Bringing Inuit Food Security and Sovereignty into Canadian Nation-Building Narratives

by Jessica Penney

*And this is our moment, as a country where we're unified around wanting to see us prosper and become stronger [...] and [I] very much look forward to seeing actual infrastructure built to ensure that our communities are healthy. And that's how you best assert your sovereignty [...] by how healthy your communities are.*

Premier P.J. Akeeagok made this statement at the June 2, 2025, First Minister's Meeting press conference in Saskatoon. Akeeagok flipped the common narrative of nation-building from one that has, in recent months, been fixated on fast-tracking pipelines and critical mineral projects alongside increasing military spending to one that centers Indigenous, and specifically Inuit, meanings of what a sovereign Arctic can look like. It urges us to consider how infrastructure serving Indigenous communities can ultimately benefit us all. This Brief asks:

## What if policy approaches to Arctic sovereignty focused on building healthy communities rather than on militarization and extractivism?

### Military Security and the North

Over the past year, there has been a renewed focus on the Arctic at the national level. In December 2024, the Federal Government released Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy, seemingly motivated, at least in part, by perceived threats to Canada's ownership of the Arctic and its potentially lucrative waterways and critical minerals. A significant focus of the Policy is on addressing purported foreign interference from Russia and China.

More recently, during the 2025 federal election, all major parties reiterated concerns that the Arctic was under threat and declared a need to increase military presence in the region to combat these dangers. For the Conservatives, this included unilaterally announcing plans to build a military base in Iqaluit, apparently without any consultation with Inuit organizations or the territorial government.

This is not a new phenomenon. Northern Indigenous lands have been co-opted for military purposes for decades now, including the construction of the Distant Early Warning Line radar stations constructed during the Cold War to deter against hypothetical Soviet attacks. Other examples include military sites in Iqaluit and Happy Valley-Goose Bay (among others) with long histories of military waste contamination requiring environmental remediation. Even Northern Canadian Parks, like Torngat Mountains, are home to Canadian military infrastructure.

### Food Security as Arctic Security

Narratives of "security" inevitably conjure ideas of protectionism and threats of war. However, there is another security issue that is much more present in everyday life in Northern communities: that of food security. Food insecurity is a longstanding issue in Inuit communities. According to Statistics Canada, in 2022, 61.8% of Inuit in Canada were food insecure. In Nunavut specifically, 76% of the Inuit population was food insecure. These are staggering numbers — far higher than in Southern Canada. Contemporary federal policy approaches to address this issue have failed to improve outcomes.

One of the most notable food security policies is the Nutrition North Canada (NNC) program, which operates as a subsidy provided directly to grocers to reduce shipping costs. The companies are then expected to pass the savings along to customers. However, researchers have shown that for every dollar paid to retailers, only 67 cents of savings were passed down to shoppers. In October 2024, the federal government announced an independent review of the NNC program.

Another recent approach to addressing food insecurity was financial grocery support for Inuit children provided through the Inuit Child First Initiative (ICFI), the temporary Inuit equivalent to Jordan's Principle. At first, applications showing individual need were required to request grocery support. However, with the massive need present in Nunavut, by late 2024, requests were being made at the group level and approved for all Inuit children in most Nunavut communities to purchase food at local grocery stores. This program was only funded until March 2025, and while funding for ICFI was extended, community-wide grocery support programs have not been approved. Individual applications for food supports are also no longer being regularly approved, leaving hungry children without access to basic nutrition.

From the example of the NNC program and ICFI grocery supports, we can see that temporary and piecemeal approaches that largely benefit monopolistic corporations like the Northwest Company are not the solution.

The latest Arctic narratives, including in the Liberal election platform, have not concentrated on the important issue of food security in a manner that recognizes the intense need in the North. Instead, narratives have centred on developing the Arctic for military purposes that serve the wider Canadian nation-state. Throwing money at “security” in the Arctic without special consideration for the social conditions, which have arisen in part due to previous ill-considered initiatives, will not result in better health outcomes for Northerners. Instead, it will only benefit those companies who serve corporate interests and the military-industrial complex.

## An Alternative Approach to Security

As an alternative, policy initiatives related to Arctic sovereignty should focus on holistic approaches for healthy communities. That means considering Inuit food security, but also considerations for Inuit food sovereignty.

**Inuit food sovereignty refers to the rights of Inuit – not just having enough food to meet basic needs – but for Inuit to choose what they eat and how they get their food. This approach would recognize that food nourishes the whole person and community physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually.**

Inuit organizations have made suggestions for food security policies and programs that can promote healthy communities in the Inuit Nunangat Food Security Strategy. Qikiqtani Inuit Association has also outlined practical pathways for building a harvesting economy through the creation of hunting infrastructure, harvester and steward programs, and policy frameworks that support Inuit management of the Inuit Nunangat food system. The importance of hunting, harvesting, and fishing to the Northern Indigenous economy is also highlighted in the Yellowhead report, Pinasunniq: Reflections on a Northern Indigenous Economy. It is time that these food security innovations are prioritized above misguided “solutions” developed far from the realities of the North.

Having a strong, healthy, fed society in the Arctic is Canada's most convincing argument for sovereignty. Inuit have, by and large, advocated for being part of the Canadian nation-state. The late Inuk politician and activist Jose Kusugak said:

**Do Inuit see themselves as Inuit first or as Canadians first? I have always thought those two sentiments were one and the same. After all, during our many meetings with Inuit from countries such as Denmark, the United States, or Russia, we have always been Canadian Inuit.**

Inuit have sacrificed greatly to build Canada, including by serving as essentially “human flagpoles” in high Arctic communities. They also serve as Canadian Rangers at high rates, acting as the military's “eyes and ears” in the Arctic.

With at least the same kind of urgency that policy makers speak about military security, Arctic policy approaches must serve Inuit needs, which includes centering food security as a key part of nation-building.

#### **CITATION**

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