



**Bridging Strategies:
Integrating Indigenous Knowledge in NATO Expansion
to Safeguard Indigenous Land Rights in the Arctic**

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Key points

- **NATO expansion and indigenous impact:** NATO's growing presence in the Arctic raises concerns about the impact on indigenous land rights. This expansion can lead to conflicts over land usage and threaten cultural preservation.
- **Importance of indigenous knowledge:** The integration of indigenous knowledge into NATO's strategic framework is proposed as a solution. Leveraging this knowledge can promote sustainable security practices that respect the Saami's territorial rights.
- **Policy recommendations:** The paper recommends that the EU incorporate indigenous knowledge into its environmental and security policies, strengthen legal protections for indigenous land rights, and promote partnerships between NATO and indigenous communities to support sustainable development.

Introduction

The expansion of NATO has become a critical focus for the European Union, as it intersects with political and cultural dynamics within member states. One significant and often overlooked aspect of this expansion is its impact on the land usage rights of indigenous populations, for example the Saami people in Sweden and Finland. As NATO expands, the traditional territories of indigenous communities face increasing pressures, leading to potential conflicts over land rights and cultural preservation (Rosamond, 2011; Shvets & Hossain, 2022, p. 67 & 68).

The Saami, recognized as the indigenous people of northern Scandinavia, have long managed their lands sustainably, with a deep understanding of the balance between human activity and the environment. However, NATO's strategic interests in these regions often clash with the Saami's way of life, threatening their territorial integrity (Last, 2022). This policy paper aims to address the complexities of this issue by advocating for a collaborative approach between NATO and indigenous communities, leveraging indigenous knowledge for mutual benefit.

This policy paper posits that the integration of indigenous knowledge within NATO's strategic framework can serve as a pathway to more sustainable security practices. It proposes concrete measures for dialogue and cooperation between NATO and indigenous communities, ensuring that the rights and lands of the indigenous communities are respected and preserved. While NATO expansion is the central focus of this policy paper, the European Union (EU) plays an essential role in addressing its impacts due to its commitment to human rights, sustainable development, and regional stability in the Arctic. By adopting this inclusive approach, the EU can lead the way in redefining security without threatening indigenous land rights. As an influential political and economic actor, the EU can promote policies that protect indigenous rights and foster cooperation between NATO and indigenous communities. The EU thus plays a role in supporting indigenous rights.

Background: indigenous land rights in the Arctic

The Arctic region has become a point for discussions on land rights due to its unique environmental and geopolitical significance. Indigenous peoples, including the Saami, Inuit, and Nenets, have traditionally inhabited the Arctic, possessing good knowledge and a long-standing relationship with their lands. However, their land rights are increasingly threatened by external interests, including military expansions, resource extraction, and climate change (Bratspies, 2008). This section delves into the complexities surrounding the land rights of indigenous communities in the Arctic.

Indigenous land rights in the Arctic have been shaped by a history of state formation, international law, and adapting to change. Historically, indigenous peoples in the Arctic have maintained a relationship with their environment, relying on traditional knowledge and practices for their livelihood and cultural identity (Fondahl, Fillippova & Mack, 2015, pp. 7-11). The contemporary legal framework governing indigenous land rights in the Arctic is a combination of international treaties, national laws, and regional agreements. Key international instruments include the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 169 (ILO 169), both of which affirm the rights of indigenous peoples to their lands, territories, and resources (UN, 2007; ILO, 1989). Despite these legal protections, the implementation and enforcement of indigenous land rights remain inconsistent across Arctic states (Snetkov, Mokhorov, Dorovskaya & Semenova, 2020).

Challenge: military expansion of NATO in the Arctic

The Arctic's strategic importance has led to increased military interest and activity in the region. NATO's expansion and other national military strategies often encroach upon indigenous territories, disrupting traditional land use and indigenous sovereignty (Reid, 2023, p. 107). For instance, military exercises and installations can lead to land degradation, pollution, and restrictions on access to traditional hunting, fishing, and herding areas (Arctic Centre, 2024).

The expansion of NATO into the Arctic has raised significant concerns regarding the impact on indigenous land rights, particularly for the Saami people in Finland and Sweden. As NATO increases its presence in this strategic region, the traditional territories of the Saami, which span across northern Scandinavia, face growing pressures (Stoltenberg, 2022). The militarization of the area introduces new challenges to indigenous communities to maintain control over their lands and sustain their cultural practices, which has been subject of scholarly debate, for example by Na'puti (2019). This section examines these challenges through the lens of Julian Reid's concept of "Indigenizing NATO" and incorporates other academic perspectives to underscore the implications for indigenous land rights.

NATO's strategic interest in the Arctic is driven by the region's geopolitical significance, rich natural resources, and emerging shipping routes due to melting ice. The alliance's is increasing military activities, such as exercises and the establishment of bases (Edvarsen, 2024). This not only challenges the Saami's land rights but also their cultural identity, which is deeply intertwined with their environment (Reid, 2023).

Julian Reid's article, "Indigenizing NATO," provides a critical perspective on how NATO's expansion could be redefined to respect and incorporate indigenous perspectives. Reid argues that instead of viewing indigenous territories as strategic assets, NATO could benefit from integrating indigenous knowledge into its operations. For the Saami, whose understanding of the Arctic environment is exceptional, this could mean a more respectful and collaborative approach to land use that recognizes their rights (Reid, 2023). Reid highlights that indigenous knowledge could enhance NATO's operational effectiveness in the Arctic by providing insights into sustainable land use and environmental protection, areas where the Saami have a lot of expertise. By adopting a more inclusive approach, NATO could mitigate the negative impacts of its expansion on indigenous communities and foster a more cooperative relationship that respects the Saami's rights and cultural heritage.

The challenges posed by NATO's expansion are not unique to the Saami; they reflect broader tensions between indigenous rights and state security interests in the Arctic. This underscores the need for a balance between national security and the protection of indigenous lands. For instance, Koivurova (2008) argues that international legal frameworks, while recognizing indigenous rights, often fall short in practice when challenged by state sovereignty and security concerns. The result is a marginalization of indigenous voices in security policy decisions. Moreover, as Padrtová (2020) points out, the militarization of the Arctic increases existing vulnerabilities for indigenous peoples, including land dispossession and environmental degradation. In the context of the Saami, NATO's presence could further destroy their ability to practice reindeer herding and other traditional livelihoods. The discourse surrounding this challenge also emphasizes the importance of meaningful consultation and consent processes when it comes to indigenous land rights (Morton, Usar & Burke, 2022).

Solution: integrating Indigenous understandings of security and traditional knowledge

In the face of increasing militarization in the Arctic, indigenous communities have taken proactive steps to defend their land rights and promote sustainable development. These efforts are lead by indigenous-led organizations such as the Saami Council and the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), which have been instrumental in advocating for the recognition and protection of indigenous rights on both national and international stages. These organizations work repeatedly to ensure that the voices of indigenous peoples are heard in policy-making processes, emphasizing the need for their rights to be upheld in accordance with international standards such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (UN, 2007).

One of the key strategies used by these organizations is the integration of traditional knowledge systems into contemporary governance and development strategies. Indigenous knowledge, which has been refined over centuries, offers invaluable insights into sustainable land use, biodiversity conservation, and climate adaptation. This knowledge is particularly relevant in the Arctic, where environmental conditions are harsh and rapidly changing due to climate change and human activities, including military operations (Wilson, 2020).

Julian Reid, in his article "Indigenizing NATO," argues that indigenous knowledge should be considered a strategic asset by military organizations operating in the Arctic. Reid suggests that NATO could enhance its operational effectiveness in the region by engaging with indigenous communities and incorporating their knowledge into its planning and execution strategies (Reid, 2023). This could involve consulting with indigenous leaders before conducting military exercises, ensuring that such activities do not disrupt traditional land use practices or harm the environment.

Reid's perspective aligns with the broader academic discourse on the importance of indigenous participation in decision-making processes that affect their lands. For example, Koivurova (2008) emphasizes the need for meaningful consultation and consent when it comes to activities that impact indigenous territories. The failure to adequately involve indigenous communities in these processes not only violates their rights but also leads to suboptimal outcomes, as indigenous insights are often critical for understanding and managing the Arctic environment effectively.

In addition to advocacy and knowledge-sharing, indigenous organizations have also pursued legal structures to protect their land rights. They have tried to shape national and international laws, advocating for the recognition of indigenous land rights and the creation of protections against the harmful effects of militarization. These efforts have led to some successes, such as the incorporation of indigenous rights into Arctic governance frameworks and the recognition of indigenous territories in certain national contexts (Jakobsen, Larsen & Stewart, 2024).

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. The militarization of the Arctic continues to pose a threat to indigenous lands and livelihoods. However, the continued efforts of indigenous communities and their supporters offer a hopeful way forward. By continuing to advocate for their rights, share their knowledge, and engage in dialogue with military and governmental bodies, indigenous peoples in the Arctic are working to ensure that their voices are heard and that their lands are protected for future generations.

Policy recommendations

Incorporate Indigenous Knowledge into EU Environmental and Security Policies: The EU should direct the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into its environmental and security policies related to the Arctic. This can be achieved by funding research and initiatives that bring together indigenous experts and EU

policymakers to develop strategies that combine traditional ecological knowledge with modern scientific approaches.

Strengthen Legal Protections for Indigenous Land Rights in the Arctic: The EU should advocate for the strengthening of legal frameworks that protect indigenous land rights in Arctic regions, particularly in the context of NATO expansion. This could involve pushing for the ratification and enforcement of international treaties, such as the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 169 (ILO 169), and supporting national governments in implementing these agreements.

Promote NATO-Indigenous Partnerships for Sustainable Development: The EU should encourage NATO to establish formal partnerships with indigenous communities in the Arctic to promote sustainable development. These partnerships could focus on areas such as environmental monitoring, climate adaptation, and resource management, leveraging the unique knowledge of indigenous peoples. By fostering these partnerships, the EU can help mitigate the adverse effects of military activities on indigenous lands and promote a more inclusive approach to regional security.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this policy paper underscores the critical need for the European Union to address the challenges posed by NATO's expansion in the Arctic, particularly in relation to the land rights and cultural preservation of indigenous communities such as the Saami. By fostering collaboration between NATO and indigenous groups, integrating traditional knowledge into policy frameworks, and strengthening legal protections, the EU can play a pivotal role in ensuring that security measures in the Arctic do not come at the expense of indigenous rights. This approach not only upholds the EU's commitment to human rights but also promotes sustainable development and regional stability.

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