

*Cold Front: Hillary, Ottawa, and the Inuit:
A Year after the Inuit Re-Assert their Sovereignty, Washington
Takes Their Side*

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On April 28, 2009, a delegation of Inuit leaders from Greenland, Canada, Alaska, and Russia presented the Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Arctic Sovereignty in Tromsø, Norway, where the Arctic Council was meeting. This historic declaration represented the Inuit response to their exclusion eleven months earlier at the May 2008 Ilulissat Summit of top foreign policymakers among the Arctic rim states, and reflects a formal, if not aggressively forceful, rejection of the modern state's latest effort to shape the destiny of Arctic without the participation of the Inuit.

Fast forward another eleven months, and the Inuit have now received the strong endorsement of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who on March 29 attended a meeting in Ottawa of the same Arctic rim states that came together in May 2008 at Ilulissat – Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway and Russia – to continue their discussion of environmental and economic issues related to the thawing Arctic.

But instead of re-affirming the sovereign primacy of the Arctic rim states on issues relating to the Arctic basin as was done in Ilulissat in 2008, Hillary surprised and embarrassed her host by scolding Ottawa for its continued exclusion of not only the non-coastal Arctic states of Sweden and Finland and sub-arctic Iceland, but also the non-state but nonetheless diplomatically savvy Inuit. This was as huge a win for the Inuit as it was an embarrassment for our closest neighbor, largest trading partner, leading supplier of oil, dedicated coalition partner in the bloody war on terror, and – at least until now – loyal ally to the north.

Tribal Sovereignty for Modern Times

Last year's Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Arctic Sovereignty updated Inuit policy on sovereignty for contemporary times, responding not only to the pressures of the changing climate but to their continued diplomatic exclusion from Arctic security and diplomatic affairs as experienced at Ilulissat the year before. While members of the Arctic Council, an international advisory body, the Inuit have long been denied a seat at the table when it comes to military, strategic, and diplomatic affairs, which have long been viewed as affairs of state. The Inuit nonetheless aspire to shape policies in the Far North that affect issues relating to military, security, and diplomatic issues, and during the Cold War endeavored to denuclearize the Arctic basin and to help unify East and West through northern displays of collaboration and cooperation.

The April 2009 Inuit declaration asserted that "central to our rights as a people is the right to self-determination," which "is our right to freely determine our political status, freely pursue our economic, social, cultural and linguistic development, and freely dispose of our natural wealth and resources. States are obligated to respect and promote the realization of our right to self-determination." Section addressed the "Evolving Nature of Sovereignty in the Arctic," and noted sovereignty "has often been used to refer to the absolute and independent authority of a community or nation both internally and externally" but that it remains a "contested concept, however, and does not have a fixed meaning." Further, the declaration noted, "Old ideas of sovereignty are breaking down as different governance models, such as the European Union, evolve," where "sovereignties overlap and are frequently divided within federations in creative ways to recognize the right of peoples."

The Inuit observed that in "exercising our right to self-determination in the circumpolar Arctic, we continue to develop innovative and creative jurisdictional arrangements that will appropriately balance our rights and responsibilities as an indigenous people, the rights and responsibilities we share with other peoples who live among us, and the rights and responsibilities of states," and that in "seeking to exercise our rights in the Arctic, we continue to promote compromise and harmony with and among our neighbors." The Inuit noted the May 2008 Ilulissat declaration had pledged the Arctic rim states to "use international mechanisms and international law to resolve

sovereignty disputes,” but pointed out that it “neglected to include Inuit in Arctic sovereignty discussions in a manner comparable to Arctic Council deliberations.”

The Circumpolar Inuit Declaration thus serves as a reminder that the “inclusion of Inuit as active partners in all future deliberations on Arctic sovereignty will benefit both the Inuit community and the international community” – and that “extensive involvement of Inuit in global, trans-national and indigenous politics requires the building of new partnerships with states for the protection and promotion of indigenous economies, cultures and traditions.” These partnerships, the declaration contends, “must acknowledge that industrial development of the natural resource wealth of the Arctic can proceed only insofar as it enhances the economic and social well-being of Inuit and safeguards our environmental security.” Anything less will be rejected by the Inuit, and with their many settled land claims accords, regional and territorial governments, and numerous mechanisms of co-management and environmental regulation, proceeding without the full support of the Inuit would be unwise. That’s why the Inuit have drawn a line in the tundra, and are so vocally insisting that their exclusion from the table at Ilulissat must now be redressed – so that the future development of the Arctic is a truly joint effort, not just between the Arctic states, but between the states and the Inuit as well.

The Circumpolar Inuit Declaration emerged from the first Inuit Leaders’ Summit held on November 6–7, 2008, in Kuujuaq, Nunavik, in Northern Quebec, where they “gathered to address Arctic sovereignty” and “expressed unity in our concerns over Arctic sovereignty deliberations, examined the options for addressing these concerns, and strongly committed to developing a formal declaration on Arctic sovereignty.” In Kuujuaq, the Inuit leadership had noted with disappointment that the “2008 Ilulissat declaration on Arctic sovereignty by ministers representing the five coastal Arctic states did not go far enough in affirming the rights Inuit have gained through international law, land claims and self-government processes.”

In many ways, their declaration was a direct response to the foreign ministers of the Arctic rim states for the exclusion of the Inuit at Ilulissat, and it counters this exclusion with a strong argument for a central Inuit role in determining the fate of the Arctic. As the ICC observed at the start of their effort in November 2008: “Sovereignty is a complex issue. It has a variety of overlapping elements, anchored in international law.

But fundamentally it begins with the history and reality of Inuit use and occupation of Arctic lands and waters; that use and occupation is at the heart of any informed discussion of sovereignty in the Arctic. Arctic nation states must respect the rights and roles of Inuit in all international discussions and commitments dealing with the Arctic.”

Hillary to the Rescue

When Hillary shocked her hosts in Ottawa last month, headlines quickly hit the newswires and virally circled the globe as news of her undiplomatic rebuke of the always-courteous Canadians spread. *Reuter’s* correspondent David Ljunggren, in “Clinton rebuke overshadows Canada’s Arctic meeting,” noted that Hillary “delivered a rare public rebuke to close ally Canada on Monday, criticizing it for excluding key nations from a meeting to discuss the resource-rich Arctic. Canadian Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon gathered his counterparts from Russia, Norway, the United States and Denmark for three hours of talks on Monday on the grounds that they were the only nations with Arctic coastlines. The decision prompted unhappiness in Sweden, Finland and Iceland, who are also members of the eight-nation Arctic Council – traditionally the body where most important decisions on the region are taken.”

In “Clinton decries exclusions from Arctic meeting,” *Associated Press* reporter Rob Gillies reported that “Clinton said she had been contacted by representatives of indigenous groups who were disappointed they were not invited, according to prepared remarks for Monday’s Arctic Coastal meeting. She also said that Sweden, Finland and Iceland – the three Arctic states not represented – had similar concerns. ‘Significant international discussions on Arctic issues should include those who have legitimate interests in the region. And I hope the Arctic will always showcase our ability to work together, not create new divisions,’ Clinton said.” And in “Clinton rebukes Canada at Arctic meeting,” *Washington Post* reporter Mary Beth Sheridan observed, “It was supposed to be a meeting of polar pals. But a high-level session on the dramatic changes in the Arctic turned chilly Monday, as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton rapped Canada for leaving out several players.” As *BBC News* reported, “Some concern has been expressed that the five coastal states at the Canadian meeting were forming an ‘inner core’ at the expense of other parties.” According to *BBC*, Hillary told her fellow diplomats that, “We need all hands on deck because there is a huge amount

to do, and not much time to do it. What happens in the Arctic will have broad consequences for the Earth and its climate. The melting of sea ice, glaciers and permafrost will affect people and ecosystems around the world.”

The *Canadian Press* reported “Clinton’s Arctic comments cheer Inuit,” noting “Inuit groups are declaring victory and Arctic experts are warning that Canada’s approach to the North will have to change after remarks by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. ‘I can only express my support for her comments and her views,’ said Duane Smith, head of the Canadian branch of the Inuit Circumpolar Council. Whitney Lackenbauer, a University of Waterloo historian and Arctic expert, agreed. ‘The clear message from Hillary Clinton is, ‘You need to recognize that this Arctic is not just the private sea of the five coastal states.’” Canadian Press also cited Michael Byers, a law professor from the University of British Columbia and author of *Who Owns the Arctic?*: “Clinton is going to bat for indigenous people. This will be celebrated by indigenous people across the North.” Even *Al Jazeera* noted, in “Controversy over Arctic conference,” that the five Arctic coastal states “have agreed to work more closely to safeguard the region’s environment and resolve disputes over territory. However, the meeting between Canada, Russia, Denmark, Norway and the US was between Canada on Monday was overshadowed by the exclusion of three other countries with Arctic territories and representatives of indigenous nations.”

The significance of Hillary’s controversial embrace of the Inuit interest, and her public rebuke of America’s closest neighbor and loyal coalition partner – whose losses in Afghanistan, on a proportional basis, have greatly exceeded America’s own losses there – was surreal in its prioritization of a sub-state indigenous minority over an allied nation-state. But the dramatic, if unexpected nature, of her defense of Inuit rights was at heart a very public affirmation by America’s top diplomat of the importance of the very multilateralism embraced by the Obama administration, as articulated in America’s new Arctic policy, first promulgated by President Bush in its final days but one that had an echo of the Obama Doctrine woven into its text, one that respected all sovereign components, not just high state but also local village and tribe as well. For the Inuit, it was a welcome assertion of America’s respect for the still predominantly indigenous nature of the far northern frontier.

Seal of Disapproval

Ironically, America's European allies, themselves a diverse mosaic of cultures and languages that are truly kaleidoscopic in nature, have been engaged in a festering Cold War with the Inuit over the Inuit right to hunt, trap, and trade in marine mammal products as they have done for millennia. This has resulted in a very odd diplomatic tension between a sub-state tribe and the very European states whose own fur empires led to the colonization of the Far North in centuries past, and which introduced the Inuit to the globalizing economics of the fur trade. Once proudly independent and with a subsistence economy perfectly aligned with the unique Arctic landscape, the Inuit became part of a new, European-centered, global economy that actively solicited their fur wealth, whether the muskrat, sea otter or even the seal.

But today's Europeans no longer have the same zeal for soft, marine mammal fur, nor the taste for Arctic country foods. During February's meeting of G7 finance ministers in the Canadian Arctic, Nunavut leaders generously hosted their international visitors with a community feast that included traditional northern cuisine, including a staple of their subsistence diet: seal meat. But as Andrew Clark reported in *The Guardian*, "None of the visiting ministers chose to attend a feast on Saturday night, laid on by the local Inuit community, at which raw seal was on the menu. Canada's Jim Flaherty was left to chow down on some seal meat alone." This was as ironic, as it was their own forefathers who expanded the fur empire into the Far North in centuries past; but they no longer feel any responsibility for the economic or cultural wellbeing of the descendants of the Inuit who had welcomed their forefathers in peace so long ago, and whose hard work contributed to the success of these early globalizations efforts. The refusal of the European G7 finance ministers to dine with the Inuit at a feast they hosted in their honor in Nunavut's capital city of Iqaluit was certainly not Europe's best moment.

The Inuit may be few in number, but they control many local economic and political levers, and their interests are now fully backed by Ottawa – their partner in land claims, self-government, and northern development. Resolving lingering tensions between Europe and the Inuit is a necessary step to ensure the tranquility of the Far North, and the Inuit are demanding a seat at any table where their future and the future of their homeland is being negotiated. This was recognized by Hillary, and though she

rebuked Ottawa, the European states seem to be more worthy of her diplomatic tongue-lashing – as Canada, more than any state, has welcomed its indigenous peoples into a participatory political life with not only open hearts and minds, but with a rare commitment to devolving governmental power to the people of the North. In Arctic Canada, the Inuit have largely been content with increasing their domestic power, under the sovereign umbrella of the Canadian Constitution.

And so Hillary's rebuke seems to have been aimed at the wrong target. After all, it was Ottawa that elected to hold the G7 finance meeting in Iqaluit this past winter, hoping to foster reconciliation between the Inuit and the Europeans. Ottawa's efforts should be lauded, and not subjected to diplomatic pot-shots from a nation whose own history is one where indigenous peoples were ruthlessly exterminated by war, assimilated by cultural conquest, and concentrated into destitute reserves, and which only recently has sought to atone for its past misdeeds. Canada had never so brutally assaulted its own indigenous peoples, and has gone much further than the United States in its efforts to empower indigenous peoples – recognizing the strategic importance of indigenous harmony twenty five years ago when the Oka standoff was amicably settled, and a host of land claims settlements, governmental innovations, and royal commissions sought to redress historic injustices in a holistic manner.

But even if misdirected at our friendly ally to the north, Hillary's intention, to show her support for the Inuit and for their central place in the emergent Arctic order, was surely intended to unite, and not further divide, the North. She more than most senior diplomats understands that it really does "take a village" to heal a planet. With Hillary now warmly embracing the Inuit point of view, and calling upon the other nations along the Arctic coast to do the same, we can expect to see increasing Inuit participation at future meetings on Arctic issues, and decreasing exclusion of the indigenous perspective going forward.

While that will not necessarily restore formal sovereignty to the Inuit, it will at least provide reassurance that their interests and values now have a place at the table – at least on Hillary's watch. And that, as U.S. Vice President Biden might more colorfully say, is a very big deal, indeed.