

Arctic security more than sovereignty

February 25 2011, By Kelly Rankin

What does Arctic security mean to you?

At first glance it conjures up notions of [border security](#) and military operations. However, a recent public opinion survey, Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Security Public Opinion Survey, commissioned by the Canada Centre for Global Security Studies at the Munk School of Global Affairs and the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, showed that most Canadians define Arctic security more broadly.

“This project with the Munk Centre and the Gordon foundation is about Arctic security,” said Graham White, professor of political science and a member of the Gordon Foundation’s Northern Advisory Circle. “A lot of people assume that means Arctic sovereignty and that it’s mainly about military overtones. That’s a part of it but it’s only a relatively small part.”

The approximately 9,000 survey respondents cited the environment and basic necessities, such as food and shelter, as key issues regarding Arctic security. In particular, when people in the North were asked about security, the conversation turned to subjects such as food security and the security of having a decent place to live.

“Lots of people go hungry in the North. Food is very expensive,” said White. “There are issues of pollution from the south that affects country food and wildlife. The effects of climate change are far more pronounced in the Arctic.”

The survey, available on the Gordon Foundation website (

www.wdgc.ca/publication/300), is a large and unique public opinion survey that explores Arctic issues from the attitudes and perceptions of people in northern and southern Canada, as well as the other Arctic countries.

For the purpose of the survey, people living in one of the three territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut) are considered northern Canadians. Surprisingly, the results showed that people in the North and south share similar views on what the problems are and what needs to be done.

“You might expect that living in different environments with different levels of knowledge that attitudes would be quite different,” said White.

However, opinions differ significantly when comparing Canadian views with those of the other Arctic countries. When it comes to international affairs, Canada is usually pegged as a nation of compromise and cooperation. However, according to the survey, “[It] is Canadian public opinion, rather than American, that is least open to negotiation and compromise.”

The report suggests the reason for the difference is perhaps due to a lack of awareness on the part of the Americans of what’s at stake. Take, for example, the debate between Canada and the United States over a wedge of the Beaufort Sea.

Provided by University of Toronto

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