

**CANADA-ASIA ARCTIC DIALOGUE**  
**Yong Pung How School of Law, Singapore Management University**  
**April 27-28, 2026**

**Conference Summary Report**

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**Sponsors:** Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, North American and Arctic Defense and Security Network, Yong Pung How School of Law at Singapore Management University, and Faculty of Law at the Université de Montréal

## Introduction

One of the main pillars of bilateral co-operation in the North American Arctic is the *Arctic Cooperation Agreement* concluded between the governments of Canada and the United States on January 11, 1988. The Agreement provides the practical means for the two countries to facilitate navigation and research by their icebreakers, despite their unresolved legal disagreement regarding the status of the Northwest Passage.

It is widely acknowledged that the Agreement and its elegant compromise could never have been devised if both Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and President Ronald Reagan had not made a conscious effort to understand the issue from the other's perspective and shown a willingness to find a pragmatic solution respectful of both countries' vital interests.

While the first Canada-Asia Arctic Dialogue was a much more modest undertaking than the 1988 Canada-U.S. negotiations, the intention was the same: to foster an understanding of the "other's" realities, motivations, and interests in the hopes of fostering pragmatic mechanisms for enhanced co-operation. To this end, leading and promising Arctic law and policy scholars from Canada and Asia gathered in Singapore on April 27-28, 2026, for an engaging dialogue (see Annex 1 for the list of participants).

## DAY 1

### Opening Session

**Dean Pey Woan Lee** of the Yong Pung How School of Law at SMU opened the meeting by reminding participants that some events and occurrences bind all states and that climate change was one such event. She expressed hope that the legal regimes governing the Arctic could be shored up to help Canada and Asian states face an uncertain future. **Dr. Hema Nadarajah**, of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada and principal sponsor of the event, underlined the need for deeper collaboration between Canada and Asian partners on Arctic issues and welcomed the opportunity for the experts assembled to share evidence-based knowledge of the current reality and gaps in Arctic governance regimes. **Paul Thoppil**, Canada's High Commissioner to the Republic of Singapore, emphasized that Canada is both an Arctic and Pacific nation. He explained how the Arctic reflected the fundamental change in the world that Prime Minister Mark Carney characterized as a "rupture" in his recent Davos speech, and quoted Minister of Foreign Affairs Anita Anand in describing the Arctic as Canada's "front line" in global affairs. Climate change, perceptions of emerging shipping routes, and regional resources are drivers of international interest in Canada's Arctic, she said, which is "our territory, our coastline, our future." Referring to Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy, released in December 2024, Thoppil advocated for a "forward leaning posture" in what is not an ungoverned space, but a region carefully stewarded by Canada and its Arctic neighbours in which there are opportunities for enhanced co-operation.

### Session 1: Arctic Shipping and Navigation (Chair Prof. P. Whitney Lackenbauer)

The Chair of the Session, **Professor Whitney Lackenbauer**, introduced how Canada conceptualizes the Arctic and highlighted many of the debates surrounding Arctic security within Canada. He characterized the Canadian Arctic as a homeland for Indigenous Peoples (Inuit Nunangat) and warned that pervasive myths about the Arctic can detract from the pressing issues that need to be addressed. **Dr. Nguyen Trung** (Singapore), who spoke on "Arctic Shipping, the IMO and ASEAN countries," referred to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as the appropriate body to govern all aspects of shipping in the Arctic. He noted that while ASEAN states do not have many ships active in the region, they are among the top flag states and suppliers of seafarers in the world and therefore challenged the participants to consider what due diligent obligations weigh on ASEAN states in regulating their vessels for Arctic shipping and whether the IMO might play a greater role. **Professor Kentaro Nishimoto** (Japan), who spoke on "Arctic Shipping and Navigation in Japan's Arctic Policy," explained that the Japan's Policy (currently under review) emphasizes the need for co-operation with Arctic coastal states to ensure an appropriate balance between freedom of navigation and the preservation of the marine environment. The Policy also stresses that in view of the importance of diversified transportation routes, the private sector and governments, informed by science and technology, should work together to overcome challenges. **Research Fellow Jay Collins**, speaking on "Maritime

Safety and Navigation in the Arctic,” highlighted that navigation is increasing in the Canadian Arctic with cruise ships leading the way. These cruise ships, she explained, raise the spectre of a mass casualty event in the Canadian Arctic as Canadian SAR capabilities have not kept pace. She emphasized that it is the rescue component that is the issue, not the search; there is a dangerous gap in capacity, she said, not in capability in the Canadian Arctic. **Professor Suzanne Lalonde**, presenting on “The Northwest Passage: Why Canada’s position must be tolerated,” briefly set out the legal arguments that support Canada’s legal position that the waters within its Arctic Archipelago are Canadian internal waters and that no international strait cuts through them. She also identified four reasons that should convince Canada’s allies and partners to tolerate its position: Indigenous rights, geography, Canada’s track record, and strategic imperatives.

### **Lunch Address by Professor Michelle Lim, UNESCO Chair in Sustainability Law Futures: Legal Futures and the Arctic (Session Chair: Dr. Jiliang Chen)**

With an entry point of Canadian and Asian popular culture, **Professor Michelle Lim** (Singapore), referenced ‘the rupture’ of Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney’s January 2026 speech at the World Economic Forum. The rupture Carney invoked describes the end of the international rules-based order and the role of middle powers in the midst of great power rivalry. Professor Lim repurposed words and lyrics from Canadian and Asian performing artists (Joni Mitchell, Shah Rukh Khan, Celine Dion, Siva Choy, Kopi-Kat-Klan, Justin Bieber, Doraemon, and Matrix) to imagine alliances and possible geopolitical futures in the ‘rupture.’

### **Session 2: Sustainable Development (Session Chair: Prof. Michelle Lim)**

The Chair of the session, **Professor Michelle Lim**, referred to the intersection of climate change and the environment with geopolitics. Referencing Carney’s Davos speech, she emphasized that trade rules are being enforced asymmetrically, which has led to a rupture not only in economics but also in the biophysical space. **Dr. Jiliang Chen** (Australia), speaking on “Understanding Sustainable Development in China’s Arctic Ambition,” noted that sustainable development plays a prominent role in China’s Arctic policy. She posited that by embracing sustainable development, which Beijing focuses on green industrialization, China can present itself as a business partner rather than a geopolitical competitor, including in the Arctic. **Dr. Yurong Yu** (Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition), in her presentation on “Two Poles, One Planet,” warned that polar sustainability is a race between accelerating change and the adaptive capacity of governance. She presented three pathways affecting polar sustainability: governance effectiveness, economic activity intensity, and ecosystem integrity. **Research Fellow Sam Huyer**, speaking on “Inuit Understandings of Sustainable Development,” reflected on the complexity of co-developing and co-managing strategies when communities across the Arctic are experiencing varying impacts and when not all Indigenous communities share the same goals. He insisted that sustainable economic plans must be based on Northern philosophies and interests and rest on seven-generation thinking. **Dr. Jennifer Spence**, in her presentation on sustainable development, reflected on the need to envisage sustainable development at multiple

scales (local, regional, national, and global levels) and questioned the consequences of the shift away from environmental models towards more economic ones. Among the priority actions she identified were ensuring that Arctic communities drive the agenda, strengthening the institutional ecosystem, and ensuring investment in co-operation.

### **Session 3: Climate Change and Environmental Protection (Chair Dr. Jennifer Spence)**

**Dr. Kim Wonhee** (Republic of Korea), presenting on “Climate Change and Environmental Protection of the Arctic Region in Light of Recent Developments of International Law,” summarized the impact of three major International Law outcomes for the Arctic. He argued that the ITLOS Advisory Opinion (2024) created binding UNCLOS obligations enforceable against Arctic states, that the ICJ Advisory Opinion (2025) affirmed that human rights obligations apply to climate impacts on vulnerable populations, and that the ILC Final Report (2025) confirmed that stability and predictability are the determinative values with respect to changing baselines and maritime zones. **Dr. Hyoung Chul Shin** (Republic of Korea), speaking on “Arctic Climate Change and Environmental Protection,” outlined some of the reasons why Asian countries care about climate change in the Arctic, including impacts related to sea ice loss, pollution, and fish stocks. He emphasized that Asian states are not merely observers but can play an important role in collecting data and providing scientific expertise. **Professor Kristin Bartenstein**, presenting on “Marine Ecosystems Protection in a Warming Arctic: From the Last Ice Area to the Borealization Front,” explained that a considerable portion of the Last Ice Area is in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and that Canada has initiated the creation of marine protected areas to protect this unique environment as well as downstream ecosystems. She identified strategic implications, including the assertion of sovereignty and jurisdiction as well as enhanced maritime domain awareness, but also challenges such as gaps in protection, misaligned boundaries, and economic pressures. **Research Fellow Justin Barnes**, speaking on “Climate Change and the Convergence of Security, Resilience and Everyday Life in the Arctic,” described climate change as a threat multiplier and explained that basic community needs in the Canadian Arctic are increasingly becoming a part of national security dialogues with a traditional security lens being used to assess the usefulness of prospective infrastructure and defence investments. He insisted that resilience must be culturally grounded, cross-cutting, and that agency, knowledge co-production, and context are crucial for successful resilience.

## **DAY 2**

### **Session 4: Security & Infrastructure (Chair: Prof. Kentaro Nishimoto)**

**Professor Yoshinobu Takei** (Japan), in his presentation on “Submarine Cables as a Tool for the Sustainable Development of the Arctic Region and Beyond,” used maps to illustrate how few submarine cables currently exist in the Circumpolar Arctic (and the absence of any transpolar cable at

this time). He identified three distinct categories of challenges impacting projects in the Arctic: operational (such as ice scour, and limited access for repairs), economic (high costs due to remoteness and severe conditions that have led to the suspension of various proposed projects), and legal (including status of waters issues, Svalbard, marine environmental protection, and limited protection to seabed critical infrastructure under UNCLOS). **Professor Tara Davenport** (Singapore), presenting on “Southeast Asia Approaches to the Security of Submarine Cables: Lessons for the Arctic,” highlighted how Southeast Asian states have collaborated to overcome shared security and operational challenges, including by conducting joint surveillance operations and by creating protocols for information sharing. She also underlined that while the initial focus among the Southeast Asian states was on repairing damaged cables, the priority is now on securitization since the Nord Stream disruption in 2022. She suggested these collaborative mechanisms and approaches should be explored by Arctic coastal states. **Professor Whitney Lackenbauer**, presenting on “Infrastructure and Security: A Canadian Perspective,” emphasized the importance of discerning different parts of the Arctic, five sectors of security (military, political, economic, environmental, and societal), and threats through, to, and in the Arctic when characterizing the national, regional, and international security environments. In promoting resilience efforts that seek to leverage defence investments to address core Northern transportation, communication, and community infrastructure needs, he warned that care is needed to ensure that the labels of “sovereignty” or “security” do not become superficial justifications for projects that will consume tremendous national resources with no prospect of economic return, or that might invite accusations that Canada is “militarizing” its Arctic and, by extension, the broader circumpolar region. **Research Fellow Zach Zimmerman**, in his presentation, argued that the most pressing threat confronting the Canadian Arctic is climate change, and that it should guide security and infrastructure investments in the region. He emphasized that the Canadian territorial governments, communities, and residents are the first line of response, while underlining that the Canadian Armed Forces plays a vital but complementary role in emergency and disaster response. For this reason, determining the location for new military infrastructure (including that associated with the recently announced Northern Operational Support Hubs/Nodes) is critical to the security of local communities.

### **Session 5: Geopolitics in the Arctic (Chair: Prof. Nengye Liu)**

**Professor Nengye Liu** (Singapore), presenting on “Middle Powers and International Law in the Arctic,” reflected on the new geopolitical realities focusing on the competition between the United States and China. He insisted that the changing dynamics would have lasting implications for the Arctic (e.g. for shipping routes, the Svalbard treaty, the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement). Explaining that Canada, along with other middle powers like Australia and in Asia, can no longer count on the backing of a major power, he argued that an alliance between middle powers and the Global South might be a counterbalancing force to preserve peace and stability. **Professor Arie Afriansyah** (Indonesia), speaking on “Climate & Geopolitical Teleconnections: The Impact of Melting Arctic Ice on Indonesia,” emphasized that though Indonesia is situated far from the Arctic region, it can play an important role. He identified three vectors of teleconnection between Indonesia and the Arctic: ecological

connectivity (Indonesia is greatly impacted by sea level rise), global shipping connectivity (the development of the Arctic shipping routes will impact the strategic relevance of the Strait of Malacca), and geopolitical connectivity (Indonesia might be dragged into tensions / conflicts among great powers). **Dr. Ryan Dean**, presenting on “Explaining Geopolitics in the Canadian Arctic with the Through, To and From Frameworks,” argued that as international geopolitics spill into the Arctic and drive strategic competition, Canada should focus its Arctic defence efforts on detecting, deterring, and defending against threats through the Arctic (threats that originate outside the Arctic and pass through to a location outside the Arctic). He insisted that the Canadian Arctic is one of the most secure Arctic regions in part because Canada does not station power projection capabilities from its Arctic and warned of a security dilemma for Canada if/when it adds more capability. **Professor Marc Lanteigne**, in his talk “Dispatched from the Grey Zone: Comparative Hybrid Operations in the Arctic,” identified a number of below the threshold operations targeting Norway and other Arctic states (Denmark/Greenland) to highlight their varied nature (infiltration of academic institutions, information gathering operations by tourists, and parades at research stations, along with the traditional attacks on communication cables, GPS jamming, etc.) He emphasized that these operations are designed not only to provoke but also to erode trust between government and society. He emphasized the importance of co-operation between like-minded states in countering such actions.

## Conclusion

The first Canada-Asia Arctic Dialogue was a highly successful event. It served as an important opportunity for information sharing, relationship and trust building, and articulating future opportunities for collaboration between diverse academic partners from across the Pacific. Given Canada’s identity as both a Pacific nation and an Arctic nation, as articulated in both its Indo-Pacific Strategy and its Arctic Foreign Policy, it is natural to seek deeper engagement with partners and friends in Asia – and particularly Asian “middle powers” – pursuant to Canada’s leadership responsibilities in the Arctic region. The participants’ expert perspectives on longstanding and emerging legal issues, geopolitics, investment, and climate change that are shaping circumpolar affairs in a global context laid a firm foundation for future collaboration. Based on this constructive experience in Singapore, the expressed desire of the organizers and participants to make the Canada-Asia Arctic Dialogue an annual or biennial activity speaks to the relevance of the content and the collegial spirit with which the group exchanged information and ideas.

**(ANNEX)**

**CANADA-ASIA ARCTIC DIALOGUE**

**April 27-28, 2026**

**LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

**Academics and Experts**

**Canada**

Justin Barnes, Research Fellow, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, Canada and Ph.D. candidate, Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Canada

Dr. / Professor Kristin Bartenstein, Faculty of Law, Université Laval

Jay Collins, Arctic Advisor, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, Canada

Dr. / Professor Ryan Dean, Assistant Professor, Dallaire Centre of Excellence for Peace and Security, Canadian Defence Academy

Sam Huyer, Research Fellow, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, Canada

Dr. / Professor P. Whitney Lackenbauer, School for the Study of Canada, Trent University and Network lead of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, Canada

Dr. / Professor Suzanne Lalonde, Faculty of Law, Université de Montréal, co-lead of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, Canada

Dr. / Professor Marc Lanteigne, Political Sciences Department, UiT/The Arctic University of Norway

Dr. Jennier Spence, Executive Director of the Arctic Initiative at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs

Zach Zimmerman, Research Fellow, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, Canada

**Asia**

Dr. / Professor Arie Afriansyah, Faculty of Law, Universitas Indonesia

Dr. Jilian Chen, Lecturer, Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS), University of Tasmania, Australia

Dr. / Professor Tara Davenport, Assistant Professor, Co-Head of Ocean Law and Policy Programme, Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore

Dr. / Professor Nengye Liu, Associate Professor, Yong Pung How School of Law, Singapore Management University

Dr. / Professor Michelle Lim, UNESCO Chair in Sustainability Law Futures, Associate Professor, Yong Pung How School of Law, Singapore Management University

Dr. / Professor Kentaro Nishimoto, Professor of International Law, Graduate Schools for Law and Politics, University of Tokyo

Dr. Hyoung Chul Shin, President of Korean Polar Research Institute (KOPRI), Republic of Korea

Dr. / Professor Yoshinobu Takei, Associate Professor, Faculty of Law, Keio University, Japan

Dr. Nguyen Trung, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore

Dr. Kim Wonhee, Director of the Ocean Law Research, Korea Institute of Ocean Science and Technology (KIOST), Republic of Korea

Dr. Yurong Yu, Scientific Adviser, Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition

### **Other Participants**

His Excellency Paul Thoppil, Canada High Commissioner to the Republic of Singapore

Professor Pey Woan Lee, Dean, Singapore Management University, Yong Pung School of Law

Dr. Hema Nadarajah, Program Manager, Southeast Asia / Arctic / Space, Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada

Ms. Lee Hui Ting, Senior Manager, Centre for Commercial Law in Asia, Singapore Management University