

# THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Internal Waterway or International Strait?

## WHAT IS THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE (NWP)?

The NWP is a sea route passing through various Nunavutian islands. **Canada** has claimed sovereignty over the NWP for 100+ years.<sup>1</sup>



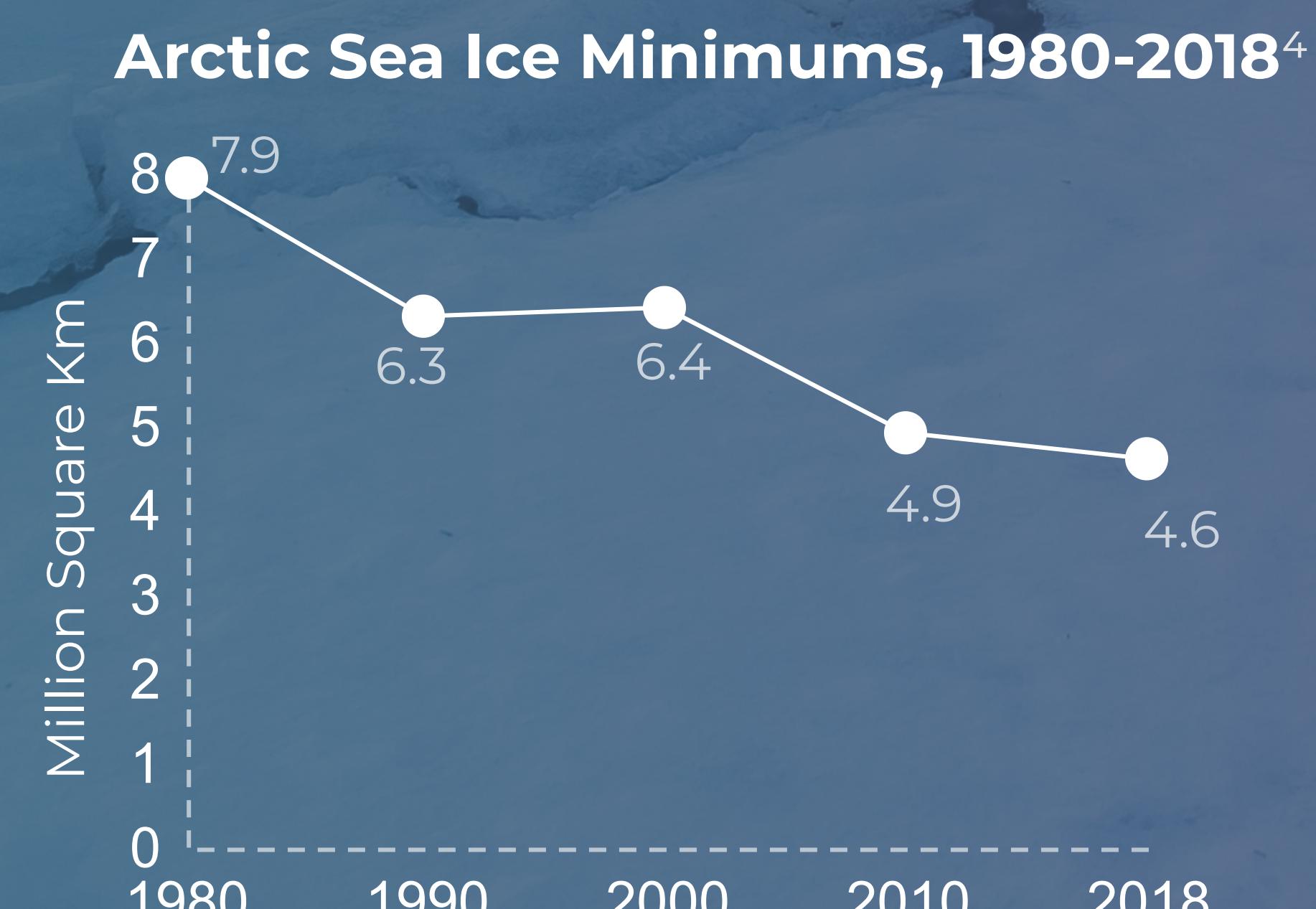
**9** Inuit groups inhabit the surrounding Arctic territory:<sup>2</sup>

- Labradormiut
- Nunavimmiut
- Nunatsiarmiut
- Iglulingmiut
- Kivallirmiut
- Netsilingmiut
- Inuinnait
- Qikirtamiut
- Inuvialuit

## CONTESTED SOVEREIGNTY

- Contested sovereignty claims over the NWP hinge on the debate between the Canadian government claims that the Passage is part of Canada's internal waterways—thus under Canada's complete control.<sup>3</sup>
- But, the United States and various European countries claim that they are an international strait—like the English Channel or Strait of Gibraltar—allowing free and unencumbered passage.<sup>4</sup>

## CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE ARCTIC



- Arctic ice has decreased by approximately **12.8%** per decade since 1979, increasing accessibility to trading routes in the Arctic.<sup>5</sup>
- Previously, Canada's claims were strengthened by the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea, Article 234, which allows for greater national control over ice-covered areas.<sup>6</sup>
- As ice melts in the Passage, however, this justification is more difficult to sustain.

### Sources

1 Donald Rothwell. "The Canadian-US Northwest Passage Dispute."

2 Canadian Encyclopaedia

3 Donald Rothwell

4. Melody Schreiber. "Russia and Canada may lose their legal claim to Arctic seaways as ice melts, experts say."

5 NASA. "Arctic Sea Ice Minimum."

6. Melody Schreiber

## TRADE AND SHIPPING IN THE ARCTIC

- Between 1990 and 2015, traffic in the NWP **tripled.**<sup>7</sup>
- The NWP shortens shipping routes between Asia and the U.S. east coast by **8,050 km.**<sup>8</sup>
- The NWP shaves nearly **4,000 km** off the route from Europe to Asia.<sup>9</sup>
- In 2013, Danish bulk carrier Nordic Orion saved about **\$200,000** and **4 days** by using the NWP.<sup>10</sup>
- Ships from **20 countries** used Russia's Northern Sea Route in 2018, carrying a total of **20M tons** of cargo. Cargo through the Northern Sea Route is expected to **quadruple** by 2025.<sup>11</sup>
- In 2018, China announced its Polar Silk Road Initiative, working with Arctic states to develop shipping routes in the Arctic, such as in the NWP.<sup>12</sup>

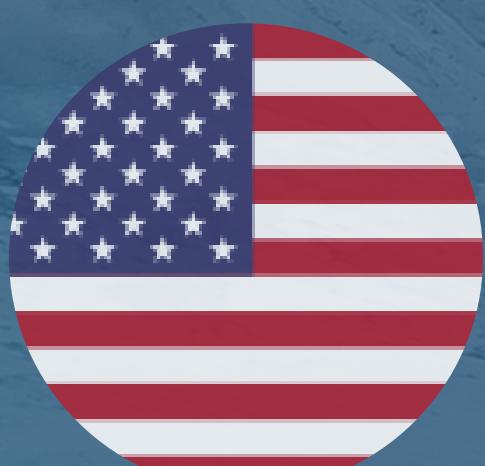


## NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE ARCTIC



- Nearly **1/4** of the earth's undiscovered petroleum resources are in the Arctic and **80%** of this is estimated to be offshore.<sup>13</sup>
- The region also contains uranium, copper, nickel, and iron, used for steel and auto manufacturing and energy.<sup>14</sup>

## ARCTIC SOVEREIGNTY AND SECURITY



The **United States** and Canada have a 30-year old agreement under which the U.S. agrees to ask Canada's permission before sending icebreakers through the Northwest Passage and Canada always gives it.<sup>15</sup> However, ice-free access to the Passage presents significant new security and trade implications for all sides, it seems that a friendly agreement between neighbors is no longer enough.<sup>16</sup>



**Russia**, an Arctic state, largely controls the Northern Sea Route across from the NWP. **1/10** of its economic investments are in the region. Since 2013, Russia has built/updated **7** military bases and radar and missile defense systems to ensure full coverage of their Arctic coast.<sup>17</sup>



**China**, an observer state on the Arctic Council, has sought to build infrastructure in the region. In 2013, it declared itself a "Near-Arctic state," allying with Russia in Arctic economic initiatives. In 2017, a research vessel, the Xuelong, was the first Chinese ship to traverse the NWP.<sup>18</sup>



**NATO** has increased its interest in the Arctic as non-NATO members begin to militarize the region. In October 2018, NATO engaged in its largest military exercise since the Cold War, with over **50,000** personnel from **31** participating nations. Set in Norway, the exercise simulated a collective defense scenario in cold weather.<sup>19</sup>

Created by Alexandra Shah, Canada Institute

### Sources:

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Institute of North America  
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9 Ibid.  
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11. Financial Times  
12 China's Arctic Policy White Paper  
13 2008 Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal  
14 The Arctic, 2019

- 15 Melody Schreiber  
16. Carolyn Beeler. "Who controls the Northwest Passage? It's up for debate." Financial Times.

- 18 Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019  
19 NATO Trident Juncture 2018