

REPRESENT

Indigenous Representation in National Security

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Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. In this article, Gabriella Gricius addresses the need for more Indigenous representation in the national security field and how Indigenous voices can provide vital recommendations to policymakers.

Even as representation in national security spaces is slowly becoming more racially and gender diverse, one area that the national security community continues to broadly ignore is Indigenous representation. Although Indigenous representation may not be the first type of diversity that springs to mind, the national security arena has good reason to reconsider. Changing types of threats and important theaters of geopolitical competition suggest that bringing in Indigenous voices and people would be beneficial to America's national security strategy.

Within the entire Department of Defense (DoD), a 2019 Demographic Report [states](#) that collectively American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (NHPI) members make up two percent (41,787 individuals) of the total DoD Force. Of that two percent, only 2,862 are active duty officers (0.06 percent of total DoD representation). In a 2020 DoD report on diversity, this trend continues [showing](#) that NHPI and AIAN individually make up less than one percent of both enlisted and officer personnel. This lack of representation is reflected in the Intelligence Community (IC). In FY 2018, the combined demographics of AIAN and NHPI [made up](#) 0.7 percent of the IC workforce. A 2011 report from the Military Leadership Diversity Commission further [noted](#) that American Indians, Pacific Islanders, Alaska Natives, and those of two or more races were underrepresented in promotion rates across the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard. In the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Inclusive Diversity Report for FY 2018, Indigenous representation is only [mentioned](#) twice. DHS noted a recruitment visit to the National Native American Law Enforcement Association and outreach to Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions. In short, Indigenous People are barely, if at all, counted or mentioned within the national security community.

However, there are some initiatives that appear to be assisting in increasing representation in parts of the national security space. The CIA, for example, [has](#) a Council of American Indians and Alaskan Natives (CAIAN), where individuals in these groups can gather to discuss their experiences, and advocate within the agency.

CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL CONDITIONS NECESSITATE INDIGENOUS VOICES

While the lack of indigenous representation may be less well documented, changing geopolitical conditions may soon cause the national security area to rethink that choice. Most importantly, the emergence of the Arctic as a zone of renewed great power competition may portend a more important role for Indigenous People in national security. As climate change transforms the geography of the Arctic itself, so too does it change the security challenges and implications in the region. Waterways, for example, that previously have not been accessible now present new opportunities for shortened trade pathways from Asia to the Americas and Europe. However, these new waterways also present security challenges to Arctic states as their northern borders become more accessible to illegal immigration and increased piracy. Two key examples of this are Canada's Northwest Passage and Russia's Northern Sea Route. Who has sovereignty over these two waterways remains under debate, but they both present new questions of security in the High North. With this changing geography and accessibility of waterways, a rising security question will be navigability and mapping of the changing Arctic. Some organizations are already taking steps to embrace insights from Indigenous People. The University of Ottawa and the Government of Canada, for example, have established [the Arctic Corridors Research Project](#), where Inuit and Northern People offered guidance to provide low impact shipping corridors. With the help of Indigenous People, communities provided recommendations that include: ensuring oil spill equipment is available on each vessel, identifying areas where charting is needed and areas ships should avoid, and noting that a Canadian Coast Guard Station should be established at the Canadian border. This on-the-ground knowledge of geography and security risks will be instrumental as the Arctic becomes an important geopolitical region.

Further, as the world grows more interconnected, so too does the nature of security threats. Traditional state-centric threats are no longer the most pressing. Instead, complex questions of environmental, social, and human security are growing in importance. The threats of today and tomorrow are broader transnational challenges such as climate change. Indigenous People are disproportionately [affected](#) by climate change, as their land makes up more than 80 percent of global biodiversity and is at the most risk from its consequences such as rising sea levels and warmer temperatures. Solving these security dilemmas would hugely benefit from an Indigenous outlook. In fact, homogeneity in national security [undermines](#) national security. Developing a more diverse national security community – one that specifically includes Indigenous representation and voices – will help the United States better understand and respond to global challenges, and [harness](#) the collective experience of all American citizens. On a societal level, diversity in national security is also important. With more diverse representation in leadership positions, young Americans, particularly Indigenous People, will feel more able to contribute to and participate in a field from which they may have previously felt alienated.

WHAT WE CAN DO

In 2019, the Cherokee Nation [nominated](#) Kimberly Teehee as its delegate to the U.S. Congress, as legally agreed to in [the Treaty of New Echota](#). Taking an approach that encourages participation in national security is a good start. However, the national security industry should seriously consider engaging with Indigenous knowledge, whether in the Arctic or elsewhere. It would provide much-needed diversity in thought and hopefully lead to diversity in solutions. Below are three solutions that may help increase participation and representation.

Implementing the National Security Diversity and Inclusion Workforce Act of 2019

Perhaps the best starting point for the national security arena would be the passing of the “National Security Diversity and Inclusion Workforce Act of 2019.” Originally introduced in 2017, the bill’s original version failed. However, its 2019 version has been referred to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governance. The bill [acknowledges](#) that although strides have been made toward diversity in the national security arena, much work is still to be done. It [proposes](#) that annual reporting should be made by each national security agency including aggregate demographic data that shows promotion rates, inflow rates, and professional development participation, amongst many other standards. The bill also [proposes](#) analysis of recruitment data to determine how to better attract diverse talent, incentive programs for diversity and inclusion, bias and inclusion training programs, and increased diversity recruitment initiatives. Passing this bill would provide more incentives to the national security arena for increased diversity, of which Indigenous People would be a part.

Better Reporting Data

Collecting data on Indigenous representation is problematic both within and outside the national security arena. There are multiple definitions of “Indian” amongst federal agencies, making data disaggregation difficult as quality data is lacking. This is not only an issue for measuring representation within national security but also for policy and planning on Indigenous lands. Without proper data, it is more difficult to justify increased recruitment or policy efforts for Indigenous rights and representation. [Creating](#) better reporting systems would help in a few different ways. First, better public reporting of current Indigenous representation and recruiting efforts would illustrate the lack of representation and ideally spur higher rates of recruitment. Second, better data collection could be used to improve policy and accountability, potentially leading to increased federal investment on Indigenous lands. In an ideal case, this data would be collected and stored by regional intertribal entities.

Encourage Participation and Open Forums

Lastly, national security agencies should coordinate more intensive outreach programs with Indigenous educational institutions and other organizations such as Indigenous police bodies. Setting up partnerships and relationships could easily help to improve networks between the national security arena and Indigenous voices. An increase in Indigenous representation may take a long time, but the act of widening the network and building mentorship and communication between Indigenous People and the national security arena would be, on its own, beneficial.

CONCLUSION

Despite Indigenous representation still being the lowest percentage within the DoD, CIA, and IC, there are still opportunities to improve the current situation. Implementing the National Security Diversity and Inclusion Workforce Act of 2019 would be an important start to raise awareness of this lack of representation. Encouraging participation, open forums, and improving reporting are the collective next step. Given the changing geopolitical realities both in the Arctic and worldwide, it is time for the national security arena to improve its diversity. Why not start with the least represented?

Author

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