The Arctic: States, Tragedies, and Unknowns
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Introduction—The Importance of the Arctic

The Arctic is undergoing a transformation—we are fast approaching what Young had predicted as the, ‘The age of the Arctic’ (1986). At its heart lies global warming, a phenomenon which goes beyond solely human agency and does not discriminate amongst victims—it recognizes no state boundaries. Whether Arctic change is a concern or an opportunity depends heavily on our understanding of security, as this case study will discuss. As an ‘essentially contested subject’ (Buzan 1997), various interpretations of security have emerged that raise questions over what it entails, with various implications, none more so than for the Arctic.

This case study will explore why exactly the Arctic is so important to security studies. It offers an introductory background to the Arctic and considers some of the actors in play, as well as some recent opportunities and challenges in the region. It will also examine how security in the Arctic may be seen through various lenses—realist, liberal, humanist, and environmental—and the impact this has on our definition of security. The Arctic remains at the heart of the struggle to define and re-define the concept. The difficulty of defining security in the Arctic is highlighted in a discussion of the emergence of the North Sea Lane and of the debates surrounding Indigenous populations and the environment in the region. Ultimately, this case study will argue that it is how we define security in the region that will shape the future of the Arctic.

In considering security in the Arctic, there are range of actors and issues to take into account. The range of actors, for example, is vast: 8 states (Russia, the US, Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, collectively known as the ‘Arctic 8’) have territorial claims in the Arctic, while various non-Arctic states (such as China and Japan) have a vested interest in the region. There are also 4 million Indigenous people with their own cultures and languages, and the Arctic has a unique ecological system providing for local plant, animal, and marine life, as well as supporting the global ecological system more broadly. The range of security issues in the region also complicates matters: the melting of the ice caps will bring about rapid changes to the landscape, and opportunities will emerge for the extraction of resources, trade, research and, of course, military operations. In attempting to resolve these issues, some champion state intervention, whilst others are concerned about the state’s overbearing power and prioritize local populations or institutions working within civil society.
The changing Arctic, of course, will challenge this arrangement once more. The very nature of global warming and the very real physical transformation of the Arctic will no doubt also impact on its metaphysical image in the minds of scholars and practitioners. Whilst some point towards opportunities for trade and research, others are concerned with ecological and human costs that may be incurred by the intervention of oil giants and states. What emerges is a complex web of security issues and actors, with no clear direction. It is therefore arguably ‘no coincidence that our strategic interest in the Arctic warms with its climate’ (Stavridos 2010: xi).

**Whose Arctic? State Claims to the Arctic**

States, as elsewhere, assume a privileged position in the Arctic. Indeed, for some realists, the Arctic is no more than an evolution of the Cold War, with security a matter of state security and the threat that posed from militarization (Borgerson 2009; Powell 2008, 2010). Realism—arguably the most influential theory and set of approaches to international relations—has, at its heart, states. According to Walt, those interested in security must, ‘explore the conditions that make the use of force more likely ... how it affects state, and societies ... and the specific policies that states adopt in order to prepare for, prevent, or engage in war’ (1991: 212). States, in an anarchical system, vie for power—their means to survive. The logic of self-help ensures the continuation of the security dilemma, whereby states, ‘assume the worst’ (Jervis 1976: 64), seek their own interests, and pursue relative gains. Cooperation is undermined in a system of geopolitics, balance of power and, ultimately, survival. (For more on realism, see Chapter 2 of the textbook.) This system culminates in a scenario that Hardin described as the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ (1968). Hardin argued that, in a system with no overarching government,
where states are motivated by their own self-interest and conscious of other states threatening them, all states will overexploit the resources of any given area to the extent that it becomes barren and useless to all (see Box 1). Ultimately, ‘the central theme of international relations is not evil, but tragedy, states often share a common interest, but the structure of the situation prevents them from bringing about the mutually desired situation’ (Jervis 1976: 93).

For realists, the Arctic is no different. The Cold War may have ended, but state concerns for survival continue—anarchy and power struggles still dictate their behaviour. Indeed, much has been made about the return to Cold War mentalities, the rivalry between the US and Russia, including the militarization of the Arctic. Despite assurances from institutions such as the UN, that states pursue peace in the region, major Arctic states have conducted a series of military exercises within their claimed Arctic territories. For example, Canada’s ‘Operation NANOOK’ aimed ‘to enhance the Canadian Armed Forces’ ability to operate in Arctic conditions’ (National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces 2014). Moreover, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper argued that, ‘The first principal of Arctic sovereignty is “use it or lose it”’ (National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces 2014). States stake their claims to sovereignty in the full knowledge that it extends the scope of their own power vis-à-vis rival states. Realist concerns were also highlighted when, after the Russian involvement in Ukraine in 2014, tension increased between the actors in the Arctic, causing fears of a spill-over effect (Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017). Conflict, however may not define the Arctic. Liberalism offers an alternative stance that, whilst accepting a system of states, argues that cooperation is possible: rather than seeking relative gains from a zero-sum game, actors in the international system often seek out mutual, absolute gains. Optimism, not fear, is the raison d’être of liberalism (Morgan 2010: 35). Most liberal institutionalists take their cue from the growth of non-state actors and the influence of international law. For liberals, the Arctic is a ‘managed’ space. The 1990s, in particular, saw the emergence of the Northern Forum and the Arctic Council, which stresses Indigenous interests and environmental protection. The Arctic Council in particular plays a prominent role in ‘managing’ the Arctic space. Meanwhile, states are bound to the 1982 UNCLOS, a UN directive that sets out to define maritime boundaries with the aim of settling boundary disputes. So far, Arctic states have abided by this commitment, which the Arctic 5 (the US, Russia, Canada, Norway, Denmark) reaffirmed in the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration.

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**Box 1  Tragedy of the Arctic?**

Hardin’s 1968 ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ emerged as a direct response to liberals who based their ethics on the ‘spaceship earth’ analogy. Here, the liberal image of one big, happy crew all working together encourages the view that the world’s resources should be held in common, with everyone benefiting equally and fairly.

However, Hardin argues that in an imperfect world made up of fallible, selfish individuals, the temptations for short term gain means that voluntary restraint soon evaporates. When the world’s resources—from plants, to water, to land—are treated as commons, there is no proper or efficient stewardship over them, leading to eventual ruin.
Furthermore, states seem reluctant to engage in rivalry for fear of jeopardizing potential economic gains. Arctic states have been quick to stress the need for cooperation; the US, in its implementation framework of its National Strategy for the Arctic Region, asserted that, ‘implementation of all aspects of the Strategy is based on the recognition that international engagement and cooperation is critical for success’, and that ‘the United States will continue to work through bilateral relationships and multilateral bodies, such as the Arctic Council and the International Maritime Organization, to pursue collective interests and priorities to promote the prosperity of the region, protect the Arctic environment, and enhance national and regional security’ (2016: 23). Indeed, Greenland, a potential base for the militarization of the Arctic (especially as seen by the US), remains largely free from former Cold War rivalries. Moreover, its relationship with Denmark has focused largely on sustainable development and the peaceful transition to autonomous government (see Box 2). Meanwhile, Norway, in close proximity to Russia, has stated that it would not be ‘expedient to seek solutions on several challenges in the North with military means; what is needed is broad civilian cooperation’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2009: 46). Indeed, rather than the militarization of the Arctic, states are actually reluctant to utilize military force in the region, seeing greater benefits from cooperation over Arctic resources (Berkman 2010).

Box 2  Greenland in Transit

Geopolitics is never stable. One potential geopolitical shift, which is certain to have major ramifications for the Arctic in the near future, is Greenland’s growing autonomy from Denmark.

Denmark’s policy towards Greenland has been mixed. Home rule was established as early as 1979, and 75% of Greenlanders voted for extended self-government in 2009, reducing Denmark’s sovereignty still further. Although Denmark’s military position remains strong (Denmark has joint military command with Greenland and the Faroe Islands since 2009), Greenland’s increased decolonization will inevitably reduce Denmark’s power in the region.

Greenland’s increased autonomy will have ramifications, not least for Denmark as Greenland refuses to support Denmark’s territorial claims, arguing that, ‘the North Pole belongs to nobody’ (see Østerud and Hønneland 2014: 163). Indeed, ‘As Danish authority erodes, Denmark is on a slope from a great power in the High North towards a more marginal position’ (Østerud and Hønneland 2014: 163).

The Opening of the North Sea Lane

One area of change that will offer both opportunities and challenges to actors with a stake in Arctic security is the opening of the North Sea Lane. At present, there are few prospects for reliable commercial shipping within the Arctic sea. However, both commercial shipping and access to resources are tempting prospects for states and corporations alike. Despite Shell’s withdrawal from Arctic extraction following disappointing figures and strong vocal
opposition, future prospects of oil extraction remain a distinct possibility. This is, in part, because exploration and exploitation of resources depend on marine access—a potential slowly realized by the thinning of the Arctic ice. A recent estimate based on a review of the literature shows that given current CO\textsubscript{2} emission rates, there is a high likelihood that the Arctic will be ice-free during summer before 2050, thus rapidly closing the time window to prevent it from happening (Notz and Stroeve, 2018).

Questions still remain; safety, reliability, the need for specialized polar class ships or ice-breaker escorts are of concern. Moreover, disagreements over the legitimacy of sovereign claims to resource-rich territories have led to concerns over whether these divisions will be resolved peacefully, or with force. It remains to be seen whether or not the Arctic will represent a liberal ‘zone of peace’, or a realist ‘scramble’ for territory.

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{arctic_distances.png}
\caption{Comparison of distances between Arctic Sea Lanes and current major sea lanes (via the Panama and Suez Canals). It is estimated that Arctic distances can save up to 40\% of the distance between Tokyo and Rotterdam. Adapted from Hugo Ahlenius, UNEP/GRID-Arendal (2007)}
\end{figure}

That said, some, such as Akimoto, retired Rear Admiral of the Japan Maritime Self Defence Force, are adamant; ‘Power games have begun in the Arctic Ocean’ (2009: 1). Realists stress the military and state sovereignty dimensions of the North Sea Lane; here, the build-up of tensions between states, in particular the growing concerns over the military presence in the region, is crucial to explaining the Arctic security situation more generally. Perhaps the definitive text on the Arctic ‘scramble’ is Borgerson’s ‘Arctic Meltdown’, which argues that, in the context where the Arctic is melting, what follows is that ‘the Arctic countries are likely to unilaterally grab as much territory as possible and exert sovereign control over opening sea-lanes wherever they can. In this legal no-man’s land, Arctic states are pursuing their narrowly defined national interests by laying down their nets and arming ice breakers to guard their claims’ (2008: 73–4). For Russia, for example, controlling surface traffic in its Arctic waters is a security objective tied to its national interest (Flake, 2014). Whilst the US and Russia are seen as the main military instigators, even so-called minor Arctic powers fight their claims; Norway has to compete with Russia’s traditional ‘hard power’ stance, and has had to assert itself with its territorial
claims, especially regarding its sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago—territory that potentially sets up Norway for conflict with Russia (Tamnes 2011: 57). The North Sea Lane, however, need not spell out disaster for the Arctic. The Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment (AMSA), which details current and future dimensions of marine activity in the Arctic, represents a liberal conception of an institutionalized, ‘managed’ North Sea Lane. The AMSA 2009 Report found that the majority of the Arctic is governed by international law that has already been established, illustrating that ‘the top of the world is not a lawless region undergoing near anarchy’ (Brigham 2011: 22). Indeed, most maritime and territorial disputes have already been settled under the terms and agreements of UNCLOS. Significantly, in 2010, Norway and Russia settled their longstanding dispute over territorial claims in the Barents Sea; an area noted for its rich fish stocks that both countries now manage successfully. While disputes between Russia and Norway over Svalbard—and fishing rights in particular—have arisen, notably in 1998, 2001, 2005, and 2011, their mutual economic interests in the area as well as socialization effects have enabled the countries to avoid escalation during incidents (Østhagen, 2018). Some issues remain—in particular territorial claims over the shifting continental shelves makes it difficult to apply the 200km Exclusive Economic Zone, but overall states’ commitment to international law—and the priority of economic development vis-à-vis military engagements—suggest that although the potential remains, states in large part prefer cooperation over conflict. As such, the ‘geopolitical rush for Arctic resources’ expected by neorealists has yet to materialize (Keil, 2014: 180).

Marginal Voices Beyond the State

The North Sea Lane, as well as the broader issue of Arctic transformation, is often explained as either an area of future conflict or cooperation. The debate revolves around who are the legitimate actors in the Arctic: the Arctic 5? The Arctic 8? Or even non-Arctic states, such as China? Unfortunately, this debate often portrays the Arctic as merely a playground for states, ignoring other legitimate voices in the Arctic.

An important dimension of security concerns the referent object—the ‘who’ is securitized. In the Arctic, of course, it is not just states or institutions that are the only actors in play: Indigenous groups, as well as the environment are also a key reference point for those interested in security. Importantly, Indigenous populations in the Arctic cannot be viewed in terms of a state: ‘sovereignty’ is an arguably misleading concept to describe a way of life that is so intricately tied to the environment. ‘Sovereignty’ implies possession, a concept at odds with the animistic cultures of many Indigenous populations. In this instance, the state is unable to safeguard the individual, and may even constitute a threat. In addition, environmental—or ecological—security is also undermined by the state. States’ unwanted intervention lies in the prevalence of anthropocentric and ‘speciest’ narratives intrinsic to the state (consider, for example, that ‘human security’ seeks to prioritize the human). Youatt (2008) warns that representations of the state in the Arctic create and perpetuate a hierarchical binary of human politics—morality and culture—as being superior to nature. This arguably contributes to human causes of climate change which perpetuates environmental insecurity which then, ironically, undermines human security. By this argument, the state is the root source of insecurity in the Arctic. The cases of both Indigenous populations and the environment thus challenge the idea that states are the guarantors of security in the region. Even more radically, they challenge the idea that the term ‘security’ is appropriate for the Arctic at all (see Box 3).
Conclusions

While in the recent past the Arctic was viewed as a distant North, today a combination of climate change and globalization is leading an Arctic transformation, with a surge in interest from various state and non-state actors, all motivated by various security interests.

States, as realists predict, are motivated by what they see as huge economic incentives in the area. A minor strategic area during the Cold War, an evolving mix of states (US, Russia, NATO Arctic states, China, Japan, Korea) are now turning to the Arctic; the potential exploitation of minerals, including reserves of oil and gas, the potential for new sea lanes, and shift towards militarization are all now a feature of various ‘Arctic strategies’ of many states. States are not alone, of course, and a host of non-state actors, from multinational corporations such as BP and ExxonMobil, to institutions such as the Northern Forum and the Arctic Council, now form part of the complex ‘web’ that liberals herald as the ‘new Arctic’. The potential for cooperation is just as possible, if not more so than conflict. Perhaps the tragedy of the commons can be avoided.

However, the main debate in the Arctic may not be between conflict and cooperation, but between the logic of states and sovereignty on the one hand, and Indigenous populations and the environment on the other. As Young (2011) argues, in order to truly appreciate the Arctic, it may be best to dispense with the term security altogether. We must be aware of

Box 3 The Power of Framing: Arctic Security vs. Arctic Stewardship

Whilst applying the term ‘security’ to the Arctic may appear harmless, a growing number of Arctic enthusiasts are concerned that the term may be counter-intuitive. For Oran Young (2011: xxvi), ‘Securitizing Arctic politics draws attention to the potential for conflict in the Far North in contrast to opportunities for promoting cooperation’. Moreover, he warns, security tends to privilege human needs and wants over the environment, which of course may ultimately be counter-productive.

How best may we view the Arctic, if we dispense with security altogether? Young argues that ‘Stewardship’ of the Arctic is a necessary shift in thinking that takes us far beyond the traditional framework of states, one that balances the human and the environment.

There is a debate about how far the concept of security can be stretched beyond its traditional boundaries of states, anarchy, and power. Viewing the Arctic through a security lens can offer interesting perspectives, and advocates of human security and ecological security have demonstrated the flexibility of the term. As advocated by critical theories of security, however, it is necessary to be aware of the historical pull of the term ‘security’, and whether or not the discourse of security hides more than it reveals (see Chapter 7).
the power of language, the weight of words as heavy and historical as security, and the implications of their everyday use. ‘Stewardship’ may be that new term for understanding the Arctic’s needs, or ‘security’ may just revert to the realist’s ‘business as usual’ of competition and conflict. In any case, the only certainty is uncertainty. It will be up to tomorrow’s students to continue the debate.

Questions

1) Why is the Arctic considered to be important for security? Whose security is under threat?

2) Are the study (and practice) of security in the Arctic biased towards traditional security approaches (i.e. realist or state-centric approaches)? How do these approaches illuminate or hide important aspects of security in the Arctic?

3) What will be the impact of the opening of the North Sea Lane? Will it be ‘business as usual’, or will non-state actors contribute towards the stewardship of the ‘global commons’?

4) Is the future of the Arctic inevitably doomed to the fabled ‘Tragedy of the Commons’?

5) Is ‘security’ a useful lens in which to view the Arctic? Should we dispense with the term altogether, and would ‘stewardship’ of the Arctic provide for a more useful critical view of Arctic change?
Bibliography


