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The Arctic security region: misconceptions and contradictions

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ABSTRACT

The security interests of Arctic states are increasingly described as intertwined. The Arctic is seen either as a region where great power rivalries or resource wars are likely, or as a part of the world defined by cooperative traits and shared security interests. These depictions often implicitly lean on notions of a security region and regionalism, albeit without utilizing such frameworks to unpack security interactions in the Arctic. An increasing number of Arctic-focused scholars refer to the Arctic as a region in terms of security interests, but is this really the case if we make use of the different ways a security region has been outlined as an analytical tool? Leaning on different levels of analysis, this article questions several assumptions underpinning recent work on military security in the Arctic, advancing our understanding of security dynamics in the north and adding to our knowledge of security regions as a concept within international studies. It is argued that descriptions of the Arctic as a new security region are based on mixing and equating two distinct features of the region: the changing climate and related increases in economic ventures; and Russia's military build-up and regional hegemony.

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Introduction

Few places have been the source of as much speculation, hype, and broad statements as the Arctic region at the start of the twenty-first century. Propelled onto the agenda by flag plantings and resource appraisals a decade ago, the Arctic continues to lure researchers and journalists to venture northwards to 'the next great game' (Dadwal, 2014). Ever since 2006/2007, a continuous narrative has portrayed the High North as the next arena for geopolitical conflict, where Russia, the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and China are bound to clash (Padrtová, 2019; Wilson Rowe, 2020). Notions of Arctic conflict and great power politics over the North Pole continue to emerge on the political and news agenda, especially since relations between Russia and 'the West' deteriorated in 2014.

However, the idea of 'resource wars' in the North has been debunked (Dodds & Nuttall, 2016; Østhagen, 2018; Tamnes & Offerdal, 2014). Arctic resources, such as hydrocarbons, minerals, and fisheries, are located in the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) or territories of the Arctic littoral states (Claes & Moe, 2018; Łuszczuk et al., 2014). There is no territorial

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dispute of significance in the region; only the miniscule island of Hans Ø/Hans Island remains disputed as both Canada and Denmark (Greenland) claim it. While Canada and Denmark (Greenland) have a tentative final agreement on a boundary in the Lincoln Sea (Byers & Østhagen, 2017; Global Affairs Canada, 2018), the only unresolved maritime boundary dispute concerns Canada and the United States in the Beaufort Sea, and negotiations over how to delineate the extended continental shelves around the North Pole look likely to become, at worst, a diplomatic row.

In fact, ideas of the Arctic as an arena for political competition and rivalry are often juxtaposed with the view of the Arctic as a region of harmony and shared interests. Underpinning cooperation in the Arctic is a desire to ensure stable operating environments for extracting costly resources far away from their prospective markets, and the foreign ministries of the Arctic states repeatedly highlight cooperation (Heininen et al., 2020; Lavrov & Støre, 2010; Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017). Scholars point to the different layers of Arctic cooperation and emphasize that the Arctic has generally remained a zone of cooperation, even after the events in 2014 (Byers, 2017; Elgsaas, 2019; Keil & Knecht, 2016; Østhagen, 2016). Such regional approaches have led to Arctic security debates being dominated by ideas of ‘exceptionalism’ – with the Arctic conceived of as unique and not subject to the same (geo)political dynamics as other parts of the world (e.g. Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017; Hoogensen Gjørv & Hodgson, 2019; Käpylä & Mikkola, 2019; Wilson Rowe, 2020).

The common point between these two diverging views on Arctic political and security relations is the tendency to describe dynamics in the entire circumpolar region with one brush. With rhetoric about Arctic security threats intensifying over the past decade, security challenges are seen as coherent across the circumpolar North (Jegorova, 2013; Lanteigne, 2016; Padrtová, 2017), and both scholars and media increasingly refer to the Arctic as one region, where various types of state security interests are inherently intertwined (Åtland, 2014; Borgerson, 2008; Huebert, 2013; Weber, 2015).

Security studies offer multiple approaches to the study of specific regions. An underlying assumption has been that the security concerns and priorities of states located within a region are interlinked and overlapping. Regional relations between actors may compound over time, giving rise to patterns that might not make sense from a purely systemic point of view (Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010; Kelly, 2007). The case of the Arctic in 2020 is well suited for examining the idea of a ‘security region.’ What are the characteristics of the Arctic in terms of military and state security? Does the Arctic, as a region, share security interests and concerns – and why should that matter?

This article unpacks the nuances of traditional security concerns and dynamics in the Arctic in order to understand recent developments better, and questions some of the assumptions underlying the concept of (security) regions more broadly. This article focuses on a traditional or military-focused state-centric concept of security, although I recognize the whole range of security studies, including human and environmental security, as well as the link between different types of security and safety in the Arctic (e.g. Hoogensen Gjørv et al., 2014). Moreover, by introducing a ‘level of analysis’ – or, in other words, making distinctions between state interactions that take place at different levels in the international arena (e.g. Singer, 1961; Soltani, 2014; Waltz, 1959) – we can move away from broad, sweeping generalizations of regional relations and advance the way we understand and describe security dynamics in the Arctic, at different levels.

One argument that will be advanced is that if we separate the security outlooks of the various Arctic states from the Arctic’s overarching strategic interests, this contradicts a

regional security conceptualization of the Arctic. Viewing the Arctic as a coherent region in security terms is based on a misconception: namely, that increased ice melt and the ‘opening up’ of the region are the drivers of security dynamics in the North. The security trajectory of the Arctic is, however, not primarily driven by regional relations (i.e. by events *in* the Arctic, economic interests, or ice conditions) but rather are determined by the strategic interactions between NATO, Russia, and to an extent, US–China relations. This, in turn, requires that we question the relevance of discussing Arctic security or Arctic geopolitics more fundamentally, since security dynamics are located at either a sub-regional or a global level, and only to a limited degree can they be found at the regional (Arctic) level.

This matters not only for understanding Arctic issues; it also concerns how international relations (IR) constructs such as ‘security regions’ should be applied and what role geography holds in interstate relations. Furthermore, it reflects the usefulness and relevance of the theory of security regions in explaining complex and non-conventional security questions. A regional approach to the Arctic might make more sense regarding other types of important security issues in the North, such as environmental concerns, conditions among indigenous peoples, or challenges resulting from increased maritime activity (e.g. Exner-Pirot, 2013; Keskitalo, 2007).

This article begins by briefly exploring four strands of security region theory and the somewhat related idea of security communities. From this foundation, it turns to an examination of the literature on Arctic security issues, asking whether the relations among the eight Arctic states – as well as the non-Arctic newcomers – can reasonably be described as a regional security complex.

Security regions

Trying to distil dynamics between states on a regional level emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This first wave of regionalist scholarship was driven by two international processes: the proliferation of new states in the wake of decolonization and the growing interest in European integration (Väyrynen, 2003). However, this approach was plagued by problems of definition, which made it difficult to operationalize (Moon, 1998). Regional studies regained their appeal with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar system (Alagappa, 1995; Väyrynen, 2003). Yet this ‘new regionalism’ was not one coherent bloc. Simplified, it can be divided into two branches: the positivist and the critical.

Starting with the former, regional security complex theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), is perhaps the best known theory of regional security. It shares many similarities with neorealist thought. However, it differs from IR orthodoxy in asserting that when the systemic overlay recedes, regional dynamics become a key component of the international system (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 47–50). Regional security complexes (RSC) are ‘traditional, state-based military-political complexes’ that are informed by a mix of neorealist principles and region-specific variables (Buzan, 2000, p. 16); they are ‘mini-anarchies’ that face the same issues of polarity and state competition as the systemic level (Buzan, 2000, p. 4).

Two characteristics are central to these regions. First, retaining the dominance of the systemic level in international relations (e.g. Waltz, 1979), there is the possibility of ‘overlay’ and ‘penetration’ by external powers. During the Cold War, for example, regional dynamics were superseded by global security dilemmas, with the two superpowers vying for power (Kelly, 2007, p. 207). The second is the importance of proximity. Regions are formed by

‘patterns of amity and enmity’ between neighboring states, with the limits of the RSC being defined by the power-projection capabilities of the states in question (Buzan, 1991, p. 190). Interactions between geographically proximate states, whether positive or negative, will be more intense, compounding over time (Hoogensen, 2005). This translates into regional security dilemmas informed by shared histories (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 46).

Another IR theorist, David Lake, has argued that regional security is not so much defined by geographic proximity as by shared security ‘externalities’ that bind states together, even when the states themselves are located far apart (Lake, 1997, pp. 48–49). Paramount here is the flow of threats – or the presence of amity. In Lake’s approach, regions become purely functional, simply ‘anything less than global’ (Kelly, 2007, p. 209). Whereas this de-territorialized approach echoes some of the points made by constructivist scholars seeking to break with the positivist leanings of regional studies, Lake applies rationalist principles. Security externalities consist of any threat that is projected by one state far enough to affect others. History is important only insofar as it is the history of threats; fear behavior overrides everything else.

Taking another, similar, approach, Douglas Lemke (2002, p. 49) sees regions as local power hierarchies all subsumed under the dominant global hierarchy. Lemke finds altogether 23 such local hierarchies under the larger power structure of US primacy. These regions share the same characteristics as the international level, except for that of openness. Lemke utilizes the concept of proximity, with the further specification that all states within a security region must be able to reach each other to ensure that they have shared history on which to build (Lemke & Tammen, 2003). Military capabilities and power projection are central: A loss of more than 50% of military power across two capitals is taken to mean that those countries do not belong to the same security region or hierarchy (Lemke, 2002). Here, Lemke focuses not on actual interaction but on the ability to interact (Kelly, 2007, p. 212). The limit of this ability to act marks the boundary of a security region.

Another approach to regions in the international system starts from the assumption that regions serve as a means of both conflict resolution and resistance to larger threats. The goal is not to develop an analytical model, but to formulate a theory of regionalization (Lähteenmäki & Käkönen, 1999). Björn Hettne, one of the most prolific scholars to promote this strain of thought, sees regions replacing the Westphalian state system in a ‘second great transformation’ (Hettne, 2009). Heavily influenced by developments in Europe, regions are a means to bring order through cooperation and can act as shields against neoliberal globalization and US hegemony (Hettne, 1999). There is a strong normative element to this approach, whereby regional order is seen as desirable in itself. As Kelly (2007, pp. 213–214) puts it, ‘Regionalism is viewed as serving progressive values like multilateralism and global governance’.

Despite their break with mainstream IR theories, this critical approach tends to adopt the basic premise of a global power hierarchy with a hegemon on top. This means that they implicitly accept the concept of openness, albeit in the context of something to be avoided through the process of regionalization. Regions are often conceived of as appearing along a continuum. Lähteenmäki and Käkönen (1999, pp. 214–215) posit that this begins with proximity, which, in turn, evolves into a shared regional identity. This ultimately develops into a regional organization and later even a regional security community. Hettne (1999) and Attinà (2004) draw similar parallels, with regions culminating in a regional security community or a regional security partnership, respectively.

Thus, the concept of security communities becomes linked with regional security developments. First proposed by Karl Deutsch in 1957, the concept is defined as a community where there is ‘real assurance that the members of that community will not fight each other physically, but will settle their disputes in some other way’ (1957, p. 5). In the mid-1990s, Adler (1997, p. 258) re-invigorated the notion: ‘In a liberal community-region, people learn the practices and behavior that differentiate aggressive states from peaceful states. In other words, each side develops a common knowledge of “the other’s dovishness.”’

In summary, the notion of security regions encompasses different theoretical approaches and examples. The positivist approaches to what constitute a ‘region’ in security studies are relatively similar. Geographic proximity plays a central role. They differ in where they place the emphasis. For example, whereas Buzan and Wæver (2003) lean on historic interactions and explicit ‘contiguity,’ Lake (1997) focuses on ‘shared externalities’ and power capabilities, while rejecting historic and cultural bonds. Lemke (2002) falls somewhere in-between, mixing ideas from the two aforementioned approaches, but with a more explicitly regional focus than Lake. A central idea in all of these approaches is that of *coherence*, namely that for a security region to exist, the mentioned factors need to hold relevance for all states within that specific region.

Critical scholars, on the other hand, have placed emphasis on the role of region-building itself, as well as on the idea of a ‘regional identity’ and the positive and cooperative effects of this. See Neumann (1994, p. 58) for more on region-building and agency: ‘The existence of regions is preceded by the existence of region-builders, political actors who, as part of some political project, imagine a certain spatial and chronological identity for a region, and disseminate this imagined identity to others.’ Some would even stretch the concept so far as to transcend from a ‘region’ to a ‘community,’ with the security dimension itself being made external to the community. The question is how these theoretical approaches can help explain developments taking place *in* a region. In other words, how do ideas of security regions translate to the Arctic, a part of the world that has rapidly emerged on the international agenda in the twenty-first century?

Unpacking the different levels of Arctic (Geo)politics

To understand how the various security region concepts fit with the Arctic in the twenty-first century, it is purposeful to separate them into three different levels of analysis. Naturally, these are not watertight divisions, with each level influencing the others. Still, they help tease out some of the nuances of Arctic geopolitics and unearth the security dynamics that are prevalent at different levels of international politics.

The regional (Arctic) level

Let us start with what concerns the Arctic region specifically. As the Cold War’s systemic overlay faded away, regional interaction and cooperation in the North flourished. Furthermore, as the melting ice at the turn of the millennium opened possibilities for greater maritime activity (shipping, fisheries, oil and gas exploration and exploitation), the Arctic states began to look northwards in terms of investments as well as presence. Already in the early 1990s, Young (1992, p. 232) asked, ‘Is the Arctic emerging as a distinctive international region – comparable to other accepted regions, like the Middle East, East Asia, or Antarctica – for purposes of policy analysis and public decision making?’

Around 2005–2007, researchers, media, and policymakers began making claims about the future of the Arctic and Northern security relations. Climate change was leading to accelerated ice melting in the north, which, coupled with high oil prices and positive estimates of the region's hydrocarbon resources (Hobér, 2011; United States Geological Survey, 2008), resulted in portrayals of the Arctic as the world's new energy frontier and northern 'shortcut' to Asia (Ho, 2011; Humpert, 2013).

In particular, Russia's ambitions concerning the Northern Sea Route require presence as regards both military and civilian infrastructure and capacity (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2014; Sergunin & Konyshev, 2014; Wilson Rowe & Blakkisrud, 2014). The other Arctic states have been following suit; with more and more of their northern waters remaining ice-free for longer periods, establishing a forward presence through coast guards, patrol aircrafts, and exercises has become a challenge and priority for all Arctic littoral states (Østhagen, 2020).

As the Arctic states – Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States – placed the North on their domestic and foreign policy agendas, and non-Arctic states like China, France, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom expressed interest in the north, predictions foresaw the region as the next arena for 'geopolitical' conflict (Borgerson, 2008; Dadwal, 2014; Grindheim, 2009; Sale & Potapov, 2010).

However, a range of studies have pointed out that many Arctic predictions have proved inaccurate, whether made before or after the deterioration in relations with Russia and the drop in oil prices in 2014. Over the past decade, scholars have produced more balanced depictions of the dynamics within the region as a whole and among the actors with stakes in the Arctic (e.g. Dodds & Nuttall, 2016; Greaves & Lackenbauer, 2016; Łuszczuk, 2016; Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017; Tamnes & Offerdal, 2014).

In particular, the Arctic states are recognized as mutually dependent in creating a political environment favorable to investments and economic development (Østhagen, 2018). In response to the outcry and concerns about the 'lack of governance' in the Arctic spurred by the growing international awareness of the region, political representatives of the Arctic states have continued to declare the Arctic to be a region of cooperation through venues such as the Arctic Council (Exner-Pirot, 2012; Jacobsen, 2018). Foreign ministries in the Arctic states actively emphasize the 'peaceful' and 'cooperative' features of the region (Heininen et al., 2020; Wilson Rowe, 2020). The deterioration in relations between Russia and the other Arctic states that started in 2014 has not changed this (Byers, 2017; Østhagen, 2016).

The emergence of the Arctic Council as the primary forum for regional affairs in the Arctic plays into this setting (Graczyk & Rottem, 2020). The Arctic Council serves as a platform from which its member-states can portray themselves as working harmoniously towards common goals (Exner-Pirot, 2015). Adding to its legitimacy, an increasing number of actors have applied to the council for observer status – among them, China, India, Germany, and the EU (Rottem, 2017). Indeed, it has been argued that these low-level forms of interaction help ensure low tension in the North on the regional level (Keil & Knecht, 2016; Łuszczuk, 2016).

The Arctic states have shown a preference for a stable political environment in which they maintain dominance in the region. This is supported by the importance attributed to the Law of the Sea and issue-specific agreements signed under the auspices of the Arctic Council. These developments benefit the Northern countries in particular,

while also ensuring that Arctic issues are generally dealt with by the Arctic states themselves.

A ‘race’ for Arctic resources or territory is thus highly unlikely in the foreseeable future, despite territorial land grabs in other parts of the world. Geographically based conflicts – geopolitics – where Arctic or non-Arctic states claim a limited number of out-of-bounds offshore resources, have been deemed economically and politically unviable (Claes & Moe, 2018; Dodds & Nuttall, 2016; Østhagen, 2018). Notions of an impending scramble were founded on thin ice, and there is little for Arctic or non-Arctic states to compete over *in* the Arctic.

The international (systemic) level

What happens *in* the Arctic is one thing, but politics *over* the Arctic are another. During the Cold War, the Arctic held a prominent place in the political and military standoffs between the two superpowers. It was important not primarily because of interactions in the Arctic itself, but because of its strategic role in the systemic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Norway was one of only two NATO countries (the other being Turkey) that shared a land border with the Soviet Union. Alaska was also in proximity with the far-eastern region of Russia, albeit separated by the Bering Strait. Greenland and Iceland held strategic positions in the North Atlantic, and the Kola Peninsula was – and still is – central in Russian military planning given its unrestricted access to the Atlantic.

With the end of the Cold War, the Arctic was transformed from a region of geopolitical rivalry to one where Russia would be included in various cooperative arrangements with its former adversaries. Several regional organizations (the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and the Northern Forum) emerged in the 1990s to tackle issues such as environmental degradation, regional and local development, and cross-border cooperation (Rottem, 2020; Young, 2010). Subsequently, although interaction among Arctic states and Arctic peoples increased in this period, the region disappeared from the geopolitical radar and lost its systemic importance, beyond its significance to these Northern countries themselves.

Over the last 15 years, the strategic importance of the North has risen again. Recalling some of the dynamics of the Cold War, the Arctic’s strategic importance has evolved primarily because Russia is intent on re-establishing its military power at large, and the Arctic is one domain where it can do so basically unobstructed (Åtland, 2014; Hilde, 2014, pp. 153–155). This comes not necessarily because of the Arctic itself, but because of Russia’s dominant position in the North, with its the Northern Fleet based on the Kola Peninsula, which houses strategic submarines essential to the country’s status as a nuclear power on the world stage (Sergunin & Konyshev, 2014, p. 75). It is not only the melting of the sea ice that has spurred Russia’s military emphasis on the Arctic – it is the importance of the Arctic for Moscow’s more general strategic plans and ambitions.

In addition to this comes the Arctic’s growing importance for Russia’s economy (Henderson & Moe, 2019). Russia’s economic and cultural emphasis on the Arctic, however, is arguably tied to different dynamics. There is also an ongoing debate on exactly how much Russian Arctic military investments are related to its (not Arctic-specific) strategic forces, how much these investments are devoted to Russia’s economic/civilian ambitions in the North, or what Russia’s offensive military capabilities mean *for* the Arctic (Boulègue, 2019; Conley & Rohloff, 2015; Depledge et al., 2019).

Furthermore, unlike during the Cold War, China has now emerged as an Arctic actor. With Beijing continuing to assert its influence on the world stage, the Arctic is one of many regions where China's presence and interaction are components of an expansion of power in both soft and hard terms (e.g. Bennett, 2017; Guo & Wilson, 2020; Ye, 2014). China has described itself as a 'near-Arctic state' as a way of legitimizing involvement from Beijing (Koivurova et al., 2020, p. 26). This is linked partly to Chinese interests, such as research and investments, but also to its position as an emerging superpower (see Koivurova & Kopra, 2020; Sun, 2014). Ensuring Chinese interests, which range from businesses to opinions on developments related to the Law of the Sea, is part of this expansion of power (Willis & Depledge, 2014; Ye, 2014).

Although China is not an Arctic state, its growing global stature has triggered challenges, particularly from the United States. Marking a shift in the cooperative Arctic rhetoric, in May 2019, US Secretary of State Pompeo lambasted both Russia and China in a speech held before the Arctic Council Ministerial meeting (United States Department of State, 2019), and one month later the US Department of Defense (DoD) heavily criticized the same states in its updated Arctic Strategy (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 2019, p. 5). Pompeo's warning – that Beijing's Arctic activity risks creating a 'new South China Sea' ("US warns Beijing's Arctic activity risks creating 'new South China Sea'", 2019) – shows how the United States sees the Arctic as yet another arena where the emerging systemic competition between the two countries is increasing (e.g. Tunsjø, 2018).

In other words, much of the increase in tension that we have witnessed in the Arctic – be it between NATO and Russia since 2014 or between the United States and China since 2018– 2019 – has little to do with events in the Arctic and everything to do with relations between these actors globally. The Arctic plays a role in these increasingly competitive relationships due to its military importance for Russia and to Chinese global economic interests in the North. But that is not the same as arguing that issues or events in the Arctic region leads to competition, or that regional dynamics alone contribute to this increased tension.

The national level

One can describe the overarching Arctic security environment in broad-sweeping, general statements, depicting it as either driven by strategic interests and competition or dominated by regional cooperation and shared interests. However, it is important to dive deeper into the metrics of the Arctic security concerns of each actor. These are, naturally, informed by the two levels already outlined. However, to disentangle the security dynamics of the Arctic region, we must consider how the Arctic states actually interact on a regular basis.

Central here is the role the Arctic plays in considerations of national defense. This varies greatly across the Arctic, with vast divergence in what each country chooses to prioritize and target in its northernly areas in terms of national security and defense (Hilde, 2014). For Russia, the Arctic is integral to national defense considerations (Sergunin, 2014). Although these are – as described – chiefly linked to developments elsewhere, investments in military infrastructure in the Arctic have an Arctic impact, particularly for countries located close to Russia (in essence, Finland, Norway, and Sweden). For the Nordic countries, the Arctic is fundamental to national defense policy, precisely because this is

where Russia – as a great power – invests considerable military capacity (Jensen, 2017; Saxi, 2011).

In North America, the Arctic arguably does not play the same seminal role in national security considerations. The Arctic has primarily been the location for missile defense capabilities, surveillance infrastructure, and a limited number of strategic forces (Østhagen et al., 2018). Many commentators argue that the most immediate concerns facing the Canadian Arctic are not defense capabilities, but the social and health conditions in Northern communities and the poor rates of economic development (Greaves & Lackenbauer, 2016). Alaska has a somewhat greater role in US defense policy, given its proximity to the Russian region of Chukotka across the Bering Strait; however, this cannot be compared to the role the Russian land border holds for Norwegian (and NATO) security concerns (e.g. Østhagen et al., 2018).

A geographical dividing line falls between the European Arctic and the Arctic, in tandem with variations in climatic conditions. The Northern Norwegian and the Northwestern Russian coastlines are ice-free during winter, but ice – even though it is receding – remains a constant factor in the Alaskan, Canadian, and Greenlandic Arctic. Due to the sheer size and inaccessibility of the region, the impact of security issues on either side of the dividing line is in turn relatively low. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Russian investments in Arctic troops and infrastructure have had little impact on the North American security outlook at large. Flyovers by Russian bombers and fighter planes may cause alarm, but the real threat to the North American states in the Arctic is limited (Lasserre & Têtu, 2016).

It is, therefore, difficult to generalize about how Arctic countries themselves perceive and respond to their security interests and challenges across the circumpolar North. Security – and, essentially, defense – dynamics in the Arctic remain anchored to the subregional and bilateral level. Of these, the Barents Sea and European Arctic stand out. Here, bilateral relations between Russia and Norway are especially challenging in terms of security interactions and concerns. Norway, a small state and NATO member, borders a Russia intent on investing in the Arctic for regional and strategic purposes. Since 2014, defense aspects have made relations increasingly tense, with bellicose rhetoric and a surge in military exercises (Friis, 2019; Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2020). With Russia intent on re-establishing the prominence of its Northern Fleet, primarily for strategic purposes (albeit with an eye towards regional development as well), Norway – whose defense posture is defined by the situation in its northern areas – faces a more challenging security environment (Sfraga et al., 2020).

However, bilateral dynamics – as in the case of Norway – Russia – are always multifaceted. The two states also engage in various types of cooperation, ranging from management of fish stocks to search-and-rescue operations and border crossings. In 2010, Norway and Russia resolved a four-decades-long maritime boundary dispute in the Barents Sea, partly in order to be able to initiate joint petroleum ventures in the disputed area (Moe et al., 2011). From 2012, Norwegians and Russians living less than 30 kilometers from the border have been able to travel across the border without a visa. These cooperative arrangements and agreements have not been revoked after the events of 2014 (Østhagen, 2016; Rowe, 2018), a clear indication of the complexity of one of the most challenging bilateral relations in the Arctic.

In sum, dynamics at this level cannot be reduced to either/or options. The national level in the Arctic is influenced by what takes place at the regional and international

levels, but it is still distinct enough to entail interaction and issues that are not linked to those levels.

The Arctic: An Emerging Security Region?

Based on the above review of the three levels, as well as the concept of security regions and regionalism more broadly, how can we better understand security dynamics in the Arctic? Some scholars have argued that we are witnessing the emergence of an Arctic security region, even a regional security complex, where military security interests are increasingly overlapping and intertwined (Lanteigne, 2016, p. 4; Padrtová, 2017, p. 1). The idea is that the security interests among Arctic states have become interlinked – i.e. that the actions of one actor impact the others – on a regional (Arctic) level.

Others argue that the foundation of the Arctic cooperative environment is not military security interests and overlap as it would be in a traditional security region; it is, rather, the *absence* of these concerns from general Arctic affairs – as with the specific exclusion of military security issues from the Arctic Council – that ensures peace and stability (Grønning, 2016; Rottem, 2017). As stated by Exner-Pirot (2013, p. 120), ‘the Arctic, fundamentally, is a regional security complex built around interdependence on environmental and ocean issues.’ According to Steinberg and Dodds (2015, p. 108), the Arctic is ‘increasingly a region that ... has an institutional structure that encourages cooperation and consultation among states so as to facilitate commerce.’ Byers (2017, p. 394) notes that the Arctic ‘is of interest because Russian–Western relations in that region have been insulated, to some degree, from developments elsewhere.’ Keil (2013, p. 252), albeit writing before 2014, even moots the idea of a nascent Arctic security community.

Returning to the concept of security regions in its traditional format, the RSCT, the first dimension, openness, seems applicable to the Arctic; during the Cold War, the entire region was subjected to superpower rivalry. The overlay of the systemic level overrode the concerns of regional players as the Arctic was turned into a frontline, complete with nuclear submarines and bombers. With the end of the Cold War this systemic overlay receded, and regional politics emerged as a driving force in the region. Canada and Finland took the lead in founding the Arctic Council to push their focus on environmental issues (Rottem, 2017), while the global hegemon – the United States – became relatively disentangled from the region.

Today, Russia has re-emerged as the most active Arctic state, investing in its Arctic capabilities for both military and civilian purposes. The United States was initially a reluctant Arctic actor, but it has increased its focus on the region – at least rhetorically – since 2019 (Conley et al., 2020). If things were to change further, the United States would be able to project its power into the Arctic. Furthermore, China is engaging in Arctic issues. China’s focus comes not from a position of geographic proximity, but as a consequence of its general global outreach and engagement. In other words, in the case of being influenced by *systemic* developments and rivalry, the Arctic is not only similar to most parts of the world, but is also increasingly characterized by a so-called geostrategic competition that has very little to do with the Arctic in and of itself.

Where the idea of the Arctic as an RSCT encounters problems is with the second dimension: *proximity*. The Arctic’s importance to national security and defense policies differs considerably from region to region *within* the Arctic. For example, looking at Canada and Norway, the contrasts stand out. Located on different continents, these two states

are arguably only loosely connected (if at all) when it comes to national security interests. The border with Russia dominates Norwegian security concerns, but Norway's security concerns and neighbor relations do not stretch across the Atlantic, or the Arctic, to Canada (Østhagen et al., 2018). At best, the wider security context can be said to include the North East Atlantic, specifically Iceland and Greenland, which, along with the United Kingdom, were known during the Cold War as the GIUK gap (Smith et al., 2017). The basic principle that geographic proximity spurs mutual threat conceptions – what Buzan and Wæver (2003) call 'interlinkages' – does not seem to hold up *across* the Arctic. This is a result of one simple but relevant fact: the distance between Norway and Canada is far too great, and Russia is also too far removed from Canada.

Furthermore, setting aside the problematic multiplicity of regions created by Lake's approach, is it possible that the Arctic is bound into a single region by a security *externality*? Barring the existential threat posed by climate change, which falls outside the scope of this article's emphasis on state and military security, the most likely candidate would be a militarily resurgent Russia. With its annexation of Crimea, its investments in military installations across the Arctic, and its increasing number of military exercises in the North (Expert Commission, 2015, p. 20; Norum, 2018), might Russia be the shared security externality that forms an Arctic security region?

However, here again we see the dividing line defined by geography and proximity. As outlined by Østhagen et al. (2018), the countries' respective positions on NATO are indicative of differing threat perceptions. If concern about Russian behavior and investments is the key factor, then this security region would also include countries outside of the Arctic, including most NATO members. Moreover, it does not make sense to have a 'security region' where half of the geographic domain in question – Russia – is not part of the shared security externality, but rather the source of it.

Finally, Lemke's approach encounters the same problems with his definition of power projection. In the Arctic, the lack of infrastructure, the massive distances involved, and the inhospitable climate simply do not allow for the same levels or types of projection that are possible in the other hierarchies that he identifies. Also here, the geographical dividing line appears to fall between the European Arctic and the North American Arctic, in tandem with variations in climatic conditions. The Northern Norwegian and the Northwestern Russian coastlines are ice-free during winter, but ice – even though it is receding – remains a constant factor in the Alaskan, Canadian, and Greenlandic Arctic. Due to the sheer size and inaccessibility of the region, the impact of security issues on either side of the dividing line is in turn relatively limited.

Overflights by Russian bombers and fighter planes, as well as expanding missile systems, may cause alarm and be perceived as a long-term strategic threat, but the immediate security threat to the North American states in the Arctic is limited (Lasserre & Têtu, 2016; Østhagen et al., 2018, p. 176). In contrast, Norway's immediate security concerns are more similar to those of neighboring Sweden and Finland, and even to those of the Baltic states, than to those of Canada or Greenland (Friis, 2019). The positioning of the Arctic as a singular region in which actors are free to project their power, unrestricted by the confines imposed by the harsh climate, lack of infrastructure, and substantial distances, seems questionable.

Turning to the different, yet linked, ideas of security communities, this approach seems the most fruitful for explaining *why* the Arctic is sometimes depicted as a security region despite the logical pitfalls outlined above. Foreign ministries in the Arctic countries

(Wilson Rowe, 2020), as well as officials working with issues pertaining to the Arctic Council or other Arctic-specific entities, seem to have had an interest in portraying the Arctic as a zone of cooperation (Heininen, 2012; Heininen et al., 2020). The 2008 Ilulissat Declaration from the five Arctic littoral states, which was repeated in 2018, signaled to the world the explicit intention to solve potential disputes between states through diplomacy within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Jacobsen, 2018). The re-branding of the Arctic Council with the establishment of a permanent secretariat in Tromsø in Northern Norway, and the attendance at meetings by all ministers of foreign affairs from all Arctic countries in 2008–2009 (Rottem, 2014; Steinberg & Dodds, 2015), indicated such a pathway towards an Arctic ‘community’ region.

Scholars have further gone on to highlight the cooperative features and the ‘uniqueness’ of the Arctic region’s amicable cooperation, while relations between the same actors deteriorated elsewhere (Berkman & Young, 2009; Byers, 2017; Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017). These views are still held, despite the post-2014 souring of relations with Russia (Keil & Knecht, 2016; Østhagen, 2016; Raspotnik, 2018).

The idea of a security region that appears most relevant in the Arctic context is consequently that of a normative region, or a ‘constructed’ region (after Neumann, 1994) – constructed, or built, by those actors engaged in Arctic studies, Arctic policy-making, and Arctic governance (see Keskitalo, 2004, 2007). Crucial here, however, is the fact that traditional and military security discussions did not figure to a great extent into these region-building efforts. The Arctic might indeed be a ‘region’ in terms of dealing with issues ranging from economic development to climate change research, but in terms of military security no such region-building efforts have occurred.

Exemplifying this, the most pressing challenge in the Arctic in 2020 is indeed how to deal with and talk about Arctic-specific (military) security concerns, which are excluded from, for example, the Arctic Council. The debate over what mechanisms are best suited for further expanding security cooperation has been ongoing for a decade (Conley et al., 2012), with discussions about whether the Arctic Council should acquire a security component (Graczyk & Rottem, 2020; Grønning, 2016); others look to the Arctic Coast Guard Forum or more ad-hoc venues (Østhagen, 2020; Sfraga et al., 2020). The Northern Chiefs of Defense Conference and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable were initiatives established to this end in 2011/2012 (Depledge et al., 2019), but they fell apart after 2014.

Furthermore, in 2019, the shift in discourse from Washington DC, exemplified by the secretary of state and the DoD’s Arctic Strategy, signaled that the Trump administration did not deem it imperative to maintain the idea of the Arctic as a special area of cooperation, thereby shattering the perceived ‘exceptionalism’ of the North. This did not change realities on the ground in terms of the security concerns or perceived threats facing the various Arctic countries. Instead, it was a marked change in the *rhetoric* surrounding the Arctic, a shift from attempting to avoid spillover from other conflict-prone regions to actively involving the Arctic as yet another arena for competitive interaction.

In summary, descriptions of the Arctic that depict it as possessing its own regional security dynamics in the traditional sense (as per Buzan, Wæver, Lake, and Lemke) clash with the realities of the region: The Arctic Ocean is simply too vast and remote. Security dynamics in the Arctic have remained anchored to other national and regional levels: the Barents area, the Northwest Atlantic, and the Bering Sea/Strait area. From a normative understanding of security regions and communities (along the lines of Hettne and Adler), however, a different picture emerges. The concept of a nascent security community has been

mentioned concerning the Arctic in the period between 2008 and 2014. Efforts made by the foreign ministers of Arctic countries, as well as by Arctic governance scholars, to depict the Arctic as a special or sheltered region have also fed the view of the Arctic as a security community. However, these conceptualizations never covered traditional military security concerns. Moreover, they have been fracturing since 2014, and suffered a severe blow in 2019, with the United States noting the growing possibility of ‘great power politics’ influencing relations in the North.

With the goggles of critical scholarship, we could envision that the Arctic states also engage in further region-building with a security focus. Perhaps the statements from the United States from 2019 onwards, bringing questions of security into the Arctic cooperative framework, might actually spur the Arctic states to make efforts to tackle regional security matters. Yet, leaning on the different levels of analysis, questions would arise regarding the level upon which to focus. For example, should the focus be placed on national defense concerns or on international strategic competition? As shown throughout this article, it is difficult to pinpoint pan-Arctic *military* security concerns that include *all* Arctic states – apart from, perhaps, a shared code of conduct (e.g. Boulègue, 2019).

Moreover, the difficulties encountered in trying to establish an arena for security discussions indicate that this issue is highly sensitive to, and influenced by, events elsewhere. Any Arctic security dialogue is fragile, and risks being interpreted through the lens of the increasingly tense NATO–Russia division in the Arctic. Paradoxically, progress in developing such an arena is tricky precisely because of what the arena is intended to achieve: hindering the spillover of tensions from other parts of the world to the Arctic. In some ways, this underscores the porosity of a ‘security region,’ highlighting the difficulties in operationalizing the concept, including in the Arctic.

Security regions – what added value?

Regionalism – in this case concerning security – can undoubtedly provide pertinent insights into international politics, as well as important challenges to systematic-level theories. A key feature of this is just questioning the role of geographic proximity vis-à-vis other relevant factors when gauging security concerns and interests. It seems self-evident that states are more concerned, in terms of security, about nearby states than those located at a distance. Even as technological advances and ‘the forces of globalization’ (see Avant et al., 2010) shrink the perceived distance between states, immediate security concerns are still a product of geography. The problem for IR scholars has been how to operationalize this.

Clearly, Buzan and Wæver (2003) try to cover the security interactions that take place within a regional setting. An example could be the relationships involving the various Baltic states, including Russia. Patterns of amity (between, for example, Estonia and Finland) and enmity (between, for example, Estonia and Russia) are products of security discourses and practices, confined by the geographic boundaries that separate the Baltic region from, say, the Arctic or Central Europe. But how definitely can we draw these regional boundaries (Østerud, 1992, p. 2)? What is the role of states that border two or more regions? What are the determinants of regional extension? Russia, for example, could arguably be said to partake in multiple security regions (or complexes, as per Buzan and Wæver), ranging from Europe (north and south) to the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Northeast Asia.

With the concept of regional studies in general, problems are apparent. There has been an inductive pushback against theories that have been downscaled from European realities and forced onto cases from the Third World. This, in turn, emphasizes the centrality of state strength – where the real concerns are domestic insecurity and instability (Alagappa, 1995; Job, 1992). There has also been some systemic pushback from scholars who hold that openness and weak states counter-argue the claims made by regionalism; regions are porous and, despite being more difficult to penetrate after the Cold War, they are still open to great power hegemony (Katzenstein, 2005, p. 22). Indeed, the Arctic in 2020 could be said to figure as an example of this, as great power competition (especially between China and the United States) is increasingly prevalent.

Furthermore, although security communities are not the same as a security region, the literature on security communities has noted a shift away from the regional focus. By definition, security communities are not geographically bound. Acharya argues that scholars today define regions as ‘imagined communities, created by processes of interaction and socialization’ (2001, p. 27). In turn, what constitutes a region might change at different times, making the ‘old’ idea of geographic proximity less relevant. In the early 1980s, Deutsch argued along the same lines in defining regions: ‘In many ways ... regions are made by culture, history, politics and economics rather than by geography alone’ (1981, p. 54). Scholars of security communities not only challenge the regional focus, they reject it as less relevant to explaining states’ security cooperation and behavior. As stated by Allen et al. (1998, p. 2), “regions” only exist in relation to particular criteria. They are not “out there” waiting to be discovered; they are our (and others’) constructions.’

Is, then, the Arctic a region along these lines? Indeed, the growing emphasis on Arctic cooperative mechanisms, circumpolar projects and Arctic diplomacy, business development, and research makes this argument plausible (e.g. Exner-Pirot, 2013). However, that is *not* the same as saying that Arctic states are operating in a shared security region, or that they share security interests.

Concluding remarks

The Arctic is increasingly being referred to as a ‘region’ in which the security concerns and interests of states are interlinked and overlapping. Such portrayals, which tend to focus on traditional or military security, seldom make use of the concepts upon which they rely, in this case the concept of ‘security regions.’ The ‘region’ label is frequently being used, but without a proper analysis of what this label means and how it is linked to the notion of the region in international studies.

In terms of national security, the desire to see the Arctic as a coherent region does not correlate with empirical facts. As has been shown here with regard to the immediate security threats perceived by Arctic states and the defense posture that follows, the Northern European and North American security domains are only marginally aligned. This fact contradicts arguments that the Arctic is a typical security region – it is simply too vast and inaccessible to fit the various definitions of a security region. This also shows how concepts of regional security are inherently difficult to operationalize. Defining clear boundaries to these regions is arbitrary, and what you ask is what you get.

This article has also unpacked the various, and at times contradictory, security dynamics in the Arctic. Some dynamics are best understood through the threefold distinction

presented here: international competition (why the United States is increasingly focusing on China in an Arctic context), regional interaction (why Arctic states still meet to sign new agreements hailing the cooperative spirit of the North), and national defense (why some Arctic states, and not others, invest heavily in their Northern defense posture).

Perhaps the Arctic is indeed a security region, if one is looking through the lens of human or environmental security and examining the pan-Arctic (regional) developments taking place since the start of the twenty-first century. Such a characterization might also link into a critical idea of security regions, where the construction of regional order and institutions is seen as an end-goal in itself. A critical approach can help to pinpoint how some actors have attempted to portray the Arctic as a coherent region, including for security interests. This might offer a pathway to explaining the growing focus on creating pan-Arctic arrangements for security discussions.

That is not to say that the concept of the security region is itself without relevance; I merely urge caution in slapping on the 'region' label when examining security dynamics between states, without clear definitions or parameters. In turn, what these nuances imply is that simplistic, one-liner descriptions of 'Arctic security' must be taken with a pinch of salt. This should inspire further studies of security politics in a region that is at least as complex as any other part of the world.

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