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# Human security, the Arctic Council and climate change: competition or co-existence?

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ABSTRACT. We argue that the current understanding of the Arctic as a region fraught by increasing tension and competition under conditions of climate change is an incomplete story. It ignores many salient developments in furthering co-operation and human security agendas, and marginalises some of the more complex and interesting developments within the region. Such changes in 'natural states' do not, in and of themselves, create geopolitical and political instability. Rather, it is the way in which change is understood as a problem for institutional and international organs that creates conditions for co-operation or competition. In the Arctic today, the balance is tipped in favour of co-operation, but the situation is complex and many actors have vested interests.

## The Arctic as a geopolitical space

The Arctic region has become a topic of considerable interest over the past decade. Melting sea ice, vessels transiting the northwest passage, and heated exchanges over territorial limits between Russia and Canada are increasingly reported in the media. In some ways it is natural to think that this interest is unprecedented in recent times; after all the area has been considered as a vast and uninhabited region of frigid temperatures of interest mainly to explorers, scientists and those seeking extreme conditions. But this is not particularly true, and as it turns out that the Arctic region has been strategic geopolitical space and an international flashpoint on numerous occasions over the past century. In all cases, however, the open conflict often predicted was never actually realised. There were no great 19th century skirmishes, no 20th century battles over the North Pole. Nor has nuclear holocaust come to the region, something which cold warriors feared throughout much of the late 20th century; only competition of the maritime strategies of the two major nuclear powers, the Soviet Union and the USA, and consequently, a few nuclear accidents (Heininen 2010). Today, the 21st century war of words is relatively benign compared to territorial conflicts in other times and places. It is also likely to remain so, no matter how popular and entertaining the improbable scenarios of the Canadian-Russian or Danish-Russian conflict over the North Pole, or even China, as an Arctic aggressor, have become.

True, in a play on words, the media has predicted both conflicts over Arctic resources and a 'new cold war' and there is broad-based concern about the potential for conflict in the region as well as the fear that 'might is right' approaches will dominate over international law (Borgerson 2008). That is to say, there is speculation that Arctic nations will ignore the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and proceed with a military solution that suits their individual needs. Moreover, there is concern, in Canada for example (Struck 2007), that non-Arctic major powers will make unlawful demands on the region's resources as well as its internal or national maritime territories. Certainly many media accounts intimate that such will be the case, because of the 'treasure trove' of resources to be found in the region, particularly that of oil and gas. The latter is referenced by those who cite the often-mentioned 2008 rough estimations by the US Geological Survey estimating that the Arctic contains 90 billion barrels of oil and 1,670 trillion cubic feet (USGS 2008).

## Regional challenges

But while those living in the south see melting ice and oil access, potentially resulting in heated geopolitical machinations which reflect some the cold war antagonisms (see, for example, Borgerson 2008), with some notable exceptions, those residing in the north tend to see a region with cooperative ties and common challenges (Heininen 2004). Awareness about the growing importance of environmental security, access to health and education, food security and indigenous governance within the region, all of which influence the way in which future resource extraction and maritime boundary scenarios play out, has become compelling points for discussion for northern governments and peoples (Heininen and Nicol 2007). The real tension is in reconciling how our understanding, of how environmental conditions like climate stability or access for resources, food and health and education services, are *de facto* 'human rights' issues and should be calculated into any consideration of the meaning of security. No longer does security mean military security, that is protection from potential enemy troops, airpower and missiles massing on polar fronts, as was the popular image of the Arctic in the cold war. Now, if current discourses on climate change are reflective, there is equal, or even greater concern about the survival of

polar bears and other Arctic fauna and resulting (due to climate change) food shortages for both Canada's and Greenland's Inuit and the potential environmental impact of oil rigs drilling for this valuable resource in coastal shelves of the Arctic Ocean, or leaky hulls and petroleum spills in fragile icy northern waters. In other words, the geopolitical issues which used to define the Arctic, previously generally limited to surveillance and making and maintaining sovereign control over Arctic national territories, has become much more complicated, even as military surveillance itself received even greater attention by Arctic powers.

It should be no surprise then, that the substantive responses to the geopolitics and security of Arctic regions in the early 21st century are more complicated, too. It is not just about staking claims to territory and 'sabre-rattling'. Undoubtedly some of this will occur, but this will be for theatrics only, as the Russian flag-planting incident in the summer of 2007 indicated only too well. The latter was not a 'military conquest', but a scientific, high-latitude, deep-water Arctic expedition to the North Pole, with a mission to bring samples of the minerals from the ocean bottom, in accordance with the regulations of UNCLOS (IPY 2007–2008). This event became somewhat of an international incident through public and media hype, and was largely misinterpreted. But it remains an example showing how a basically scientific event can be transformed into a highly (geo) political incident. It clearly demonstrates how the debate on Arctic geopolitics has become (over)heated in the recent years.

## Co-operative governance and institutions

But while there have been national disagreements; played out mainly in the press; concerning whose claim to what is valid, it would be accurate to say that this response is just a little 'old-fashioned'. Over the past half-century, for example, numerous international agreements and international institutions have come to play an important role in Arctic governance, at the regional and international level. International law, and particularly the UNCLOS, as previously noted, has increasingly become the instrument of choice to sort out numerous national claims which are in the stages of being advanced to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), while the Arctic Council (AC); a regional institution comprising political representation from the eight Arctic states; plus indigenous peoples organisations and numerous important international NGOs work to protect the region and to define means of cooperation among Arctic nations in order to do so. At the same time, however, the impact of climate change in the Arctic has resulted in unprecedented melting of sea ice, and the opening up of previously frozen maritime spaces, most contentiously, perhaps, in the Canadian northwest passage.

Indeed, climate change is in the news mainly because of its impact upon ice in the Arctic and the way in which melting ice has created conditions to make resource extraction, particularly petrochemical reserves such as oil and natural gas, easier. Less thought has been given to the other, equally important issues, such as the degree to which climate change will have an impact on regional health and safety, particularly as traditional food sources become inaccessible, tried and true hunting methods fail, and buildings collapse as melting permafrost makes structures unstable (Paci 2004; Helander-Renvall 2010). Add to this the impact of environmental damage generated by potential oil spills and other resource access-induced disasters upon the exceedingly fragile Arctic ecosystem; the problem of the very real need to reconsider and reinforce indigenous interests and land claims generated in principle (at least by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)); and the limited way in which existing international institutions such as the AC can develop regional standards and best practices because of limitations with their mandate itself. Unlike the situation in the Antarctic, in which an international treaty system binds nations by law, the AC has no legal force within the Arctic region. It has, however, developed something else, a general consensus and common interest by all Arctic nations, to maintain stability and co-operate in dealing with the challenges currently confronting the region. This includes expanding its *raison d'êtres* from that of an environmental watchdog dedicated to environmental and scientific issues requiring regional action (such as monitoring and assessing the presence of pollutants, or protecting Arctic fauna and flora,) to a body concerned with expanding international concern and action to such issues as sustainable development, and general access to health and education.

In other words, the AC is an international cooperative institution that raises issues and develops consensus. Its interest is with the entire Arctic region, and not any particular nation, although some nations are clearly more influential than others within it. The United States, for example, has been an important member state, and has made numerous contributions to the successful functioning of this body. At the same time, however, its lack of support for certain agendas have for many years meant that science and health concerns were never seen as contentious issues, while discussion and policy on social issues received less attention and had little traction. Most recently, this is changing, and there is now growing pressure to broaden the mandate of the AC: an agenda to which the Arctic states agreed about 15 years ago (Koivurova 2010; Heininen and Numminen 2011). There is also evidence of a real broadening in the vision of the AC itself. At the same time, however, attention has shifted from issues with which the AC has been traditionally concerned, which we could consider to be all types of security issues other than those which are, strictly speaking, 'militarily' defined, to those which the AC has not previously addressed and which, it could be argued, it has attempted to keep off the table, namely

those involving territorial competition and sovereignty issues, conflict and building 'peace' in the region.

The latter are indeed issues that cannot be determined by the AC. The nature of international law is such that territory and boundary claims are adjudicated by a very specific and different international body whose jurisdiction is not exclusively regional but global. According to UNCLOS, the pertinent states to deal with issues surrounding Arctic boundaries are coastal states: those Arctic nations that actually border on the Arctic Ocean. Of the eight Arctic nations represented in the AC (Canada, US, Russia, Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway) only five qualify as such (Canada, U.S., Russia, Norway and Denmark), Iceland's Kolbeinsey notwithstanding. Yet all of these states, including the US though it is not a party of the convention, are engaged with activities designed to submit their proposals to utilise the natural resources of the shelves of the Arctic Ocean.

## The end of co-operation?

This means that if the Arctic co-operation agenda becomes increasingly focused on these submissions or eventual territorial claims; as it seems to have partially been doing over the past three years; there will be marginalisation both for Finland; one of the founders of the 'environmental agenda' (which led to the historic Arctic co-operation agreement of 1991 the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), signed by the eight Arctic states); as well as for Sweden, the AC chair for 2011–2013. Iceland, too, may be left out of the loop, despite its maritime environmental setting and its close proximity to the Arctic Ocean. Indeed, it is 'the only country' located entirely within the Arctic region. While Iceland has not accepted the 'Arctic 5', it would like to secure 'Iceland's position as a coastal State within the Arctic region' (Althingi 2011: 1).

This structural and historical disconnect raises several potential challenges for the future. One is the way in which the AC, a body that works on cooperation and consensus, is being sidelined in the popular imagination by a rhetoric devoted to resource and territorial competition. A new 'cold war', or race for the Arctic and its 'icy treasure trove' appear to be much more interesting and common scenarios used to portray the current situation in the North. Countries like Russia and Canada have contributed to this rhetoric: Russia, for example, by publicly emphasising national interests and objectives of the Russian Federation in the Arctic, and suggesting how Russia's state policy should be developed with respect to the Arctic (for example Lavrov 2009), and Canada by its assertion that the Canadian north needs a new military presence to reinforce its claims to the internal waters of the northwest passage (Huebert 2010). Whether or not this maritime is 'internal' has, of course, been contested by the European Union and US, for reasons which are slightly more complex than we wish to discuss here.

In the case of the US, additional issues complicate the American 'take' on the Arctic. Part of this is very much due to the fact that although the U.S. is not a part of UNCLOS, and has never ratified the convention, it has clearly stated that is has all rights to implement 'freedom of the seas' and take all necessary legal actions for extending the US continental shelf (United States 2009). In the case of the European Union (EU), however, grater complexity is derived from its geopolitical position in, and related to, the Arctic region and EU Arctic nations. Indeed, the EU has shown obvious interests in the Arctic and it already has significant impact in the region, for example, in its many international negotiations on climate (change), and in energy policy and research on the environment and climate (EUROPA 2008). Moreover, among the Arctic states, and the AC's member-countries, there are three EU member-states (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), while Iceland has applied for EU membership. The EU has also presented ambitious aims to protect and preserve the Arctic environment and its population; to promote sustainable use of resources; and to contribute to enhanced Arctic multilateral governance (European Commission 2008; Heininen 2011). Thus, the EU believes that it 'is inextricably tied to the Arctic Region', as the European Commission's communication puts it, and that it should achieve observer status in the AC.

The second potential challenge for the future is the way in which the AC itself has been divided into two camps: A5 and A8. These are the inner coastal state 'sanctum', or A5, and the outer coastal state 'plus' group, or A8. The latter, the A8, represents the original structure of the AC, and its predecessor, the AEPS. The former, the A5, are now increasingly considered to be the actors with legitimate 'state' interests, authorised to act on the stage of international law. The rest are not, although the UNDRIP has created a framework which may well re-weight the positioning on indigenous groups, like the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) and the Saami Council, in the future. The message this sends has the potential to be mixed, regarding the continuing significance of regional political cooperation. Indeed, it has already engendered protest from both the US and Arctic indigenous peoples' organisations like the ICC.

In addition to this, there is very real desire on the part of nations outside the Arctic, to become permanent observers within the AC, as the Arctic is portrayed to the world as a 'commons' in which a number of nations outside the region have an important stake, such as energy security, and other interests. Such is the case with China and Japan in Asia, and France, UK and the EU in Europe. This cleavage of the region by national interest and territorial claims is to be expected, and is not particularly troubling in the sense that international rules and the mechanisms for peaceful co-operation are well established.

It is probably not accurate to see the Arctic Ocean as a place where co-operation in the future will be shattered by competitive national discourses and territorial claims.

Such an outcome is doubtful, if only because all the littoral states of the Arctic Ocean are following protocols and rules established by the UNCLOS. They are mapping the ocean floor and undertaking scientific exploration to meet the CLCS process. And they have reconfirmed the importance of the UNCLOS and their desire to abide by it in the Ilulissat Declaration of 2008. So, this most recent round of interest results not from a 'remilitarisation' of an old cold war front which does not really exist in the Arctic (Heininen 2010), but from the intersection of a number of new opportunities which are quite different, and in context of a regional political cooperation (under the AC) which is quite new and unique. None of the eight Arctic nations, which all belong to the AC, are truly suggesting to 'go it alone'. Indeed, the geopolitical history of the Arctic as a region over the past two decades has been one of increasing international and inter-regional cooperation and modern region-building, as well as that of building of civil society through inclusion and cooperation efforts among nations, NGOs, indigenous peoples, and a variety of institutional actors (Heininen 2004).

**The new contours of co-operation and competition**

So brazen territorial claims and bold militarisation may not be as close at hand as media pundits predict. Instead, submissions and possible maritime claims will probably be resolved through an orderly process. What is troubling, however, is not the fear of an armed regional conflict breaking out among Arctic nations, but the fact that this discourse detracts from a more substantive understanding of how co-operation needs to proceed and how a broader based human security needs to be developed in the north. The potential militarisation of the Canadian north, for example, as stated by the Canadian Government (and again arguably a discourse designed to please a domestic audience) is a case in point. Canada's Prime Minister Harper recently promised navy ships and deepwater ports with an increased military presence to signal Canadian 'sovereignty' over its Arctic territory. While a military presence may, or may not, be a reasonable response to the shrill territorial competition rhetoric that has emerged in recent years, there is little public discussion of how such military initiatives affect funding and programmes in other areas of the Arctic which might have social, health and educational impacts. Funding dedicated towards military ends needs to be understood and evaluated against a backdrop of regional housing shortages, lack of health and educational opportunities, limited economic opportunity for northern residents, historical neglect by southern Canada, and rampant substance abuse among its younger generation.

What do indigenous populations believe to be the issues and solution? Why is nearly a millennium of occupation by indigenous Canadians not enough to secure Canadian claims to the region? Does this redirection of Arctic issues towards a militarised definition of security challenge a regional agenda such as the AC's, by deflecting attention and even funding? This is not to say that indigenous rights and sovereignty has not been addressed by indigenous peoples until now, indeed the substance of several major and comprehensive land claims already negotiated in the north embed indigenous sovereignty within them. A particularly strong voice is 'A circumpolar Inuit declaration on sovereignty in the Arctic' adopted by the ICC in April 2009 (ICC 2009). But the evoking of sovereignty as issue of substance in the international discourse surrounding Arctic access has not, until the UNDRIP, had to view such claims as more than items on the domestic agendas of governments such as Canada.

Similarly, the unfettered resource agenda, along with climate change, has potential to damage the subsistence base of Greenland's Inuit peoples. While the Government of Greenland and that of Denmark is highly supportive of exploration for resource extraction, namely offshore oil, Greenland Inuit are facing similar issues of erosion of diet, health and housing as those residing in Canada. It is not clear that the potential problems have raised concern with the government of the Danish realm overseas, and indeed there are economic elite and other sectors of Greenland's own population that have a vested interest in oil development.

A debate concerning the costs and benefits of Arctic development has been waged in Norway, particularly with respect to the Lofoten Islands. While in Canada and Greenland, resource extraction and its impact on local environments and indigenous peoples' lifestyles have fuelled disagreement about outcomes, in Norway this does not play out as an indigenous versus non-indigenous issue. It is, rather a disagreement between fishermen and oil executives, green parties and other political institutions, corporate interests, such as Statoil and regional and local governments. Indeed, in the Lofoten area, deepwater oil and gas drilling has been put on hold, most specifically because of its feared impact on cod fisheries and sensitive spawning grounds. But the oil industry has significant holdings elsewhere, and active offshore drilling operations. Many Norwegians, particularly those who are officials, clearly believe oil extraction has been good for Norway, and that Norway has an exemplary stewardship record on oil and gas drilling (Norway 2009), because of the boost that oil reserves have provided to the Norwegian economy.

The problem is, then, that these very substantive issues concerning quality of life, lack of political power, limited control over how economic development and resource access is to proceed in northern regions (and this is probably true for the northernmost residents of all Arctic nations), has taken a backseat to a discussion of what are actually the easier issues to resolve at the national level. Where will the territorial lines be and what governments will have what resources? Even Norway; though it is in some ways an exception because of its emerging and potentially more conservative approach to new offshore oil development; has not been immune to

the struggle for territorial claims. Moreover, its recent territorial agreement, brokered with Russia in 2010, gave both nations a clearer understanding of the resource boundaries. Some have even claimed that this agreement brings Norway on Russia's side, the result heightening, rather than dampening territorial tensions in the Arctic region. Other the other hand, the agreements indicates that there in the Arctic are some learned lessons based on the high stability of the post-cold war.

## Conclusions

So, the significant and long-term impacts of this focus on Arctic bounty and its interest in the potential 'bonanza' of new resources and territory for outsiders, rather than environmental, economic and governmental deficits within the north, are very real. But still, one of the greatest unacknowledged threats to the Arctic region, besides the race for natural resources as a result of climate change may be the continuing way in which competitive southern geopolitical and geoeconomic discourses concerning northern development serve to effectively 're-colonise' the north and re-marginalise its peoples. These discourses dig the hole deeper by ignoring their voice, their interests and their expertise in shaping their own future; instead promoting a competitive paradigm cultivated by media and domestic political agendas. An alternative way of achieving greater indigenous participation, in addition to accessing the ICC's declaration on sovereignty, or by respecting land claims agreements where they exist, is by opening the space for some sort of acknowledgement and inclusion of indigenous discourse on a new Arctic geopolitics. This could include emphasis on knowledge (instead of on power), identity and resilience (instead of physical space) and people(s) (instead of the state). This is certainly something that the AC can affect immediately, by positioning indigenous organisations in both A5 and A8 deliberations. Indigenous groups themselves have already begun the dialogue, but still await the validation and authorization of their perspectives within state-centred institutions.

In addition to this type of engagement, the Arctic states, or the Nordic countries, could also be more proactive and define certain approaches or activities, which they consider the most promising areas of cooperation with respect to Arctic issues. Instead of trying to argue that the exploitation of energy resources can be done according to international environmental standards or generic 'best practices', for example, it would be more honest and credible to consider and prefer the use of renewable energy resources. This would represent a genuine attempt at the implementation of sustainability/sustainable development. Another approach might be to emphasise the 'human dimension' of the circumpolar region, taking into consideration the special needs of Northern indigenous peoples. A third area to consider would be to develop and promote knowledge on climate change and its (local, regional and global) impacts, stressing the interplay between (scientific) research and other knowledge(s), such as traditional environmental knowledge, or even, the interplay between science/knowledge and politics.

All this means that comprehensive regional institutions comprising state and non-state actors are all the more important. Cooperative institutions like the AC attempt to cultivate an interest in regional issues such as the impacts of climate change, sustainable development and quality of life for northerners, and in this sense, the important story is not geopolitical but developmental. It is a quieter, and ongoing discussion, less likely to attract attention than the way in which international geopolitics play out in the region, but arguably much more important. This is why an informed, critical, and broad-based discussion of northern human security, and thoughtful analysis of the way in which geopolitical tensions in the Arctic region are embedded in bigger issues is so important. It is not simply an exercise for academics and politicians, or of importance only for those who reside in the 'high north'. It is, rather, an essential exercise for all of us.

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