Chapter 14

Arctic Exceptionalisms

P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Ryan Dean

In its conventional application since the 1990s, the idea of "Arctic exceptionalism" anticipates and promotes the building of a peaceable regime across the circumpolar north. For three decades, scholars have developed and mobilized various formulations of the concept, suggesting that either different norms or rules are or should be followed in the Arctic region, or that the region is exempt from "normal" drivers of international affairs.

This chapter seeks to broaden the aperture, examining and parsing various articulations of regional exceptionalism in the twenty-first century. Some critics argue that Arctic exceptionalism (in its conventional conceptualization) perpetuates naïve, utopian faith in regional cooperation that cannot override global strategic competition, while simultaneously advancing the view that Arctic states must undertake extraordinary responses to protect their sovereignty and provide security in the Arctic because the region is *exceptionally* vulnerable. Employing their own form of exceptionalism, they imply that regional threat assessments cannot rely on "normal" global drivers associated with stability and non-conflict or cooperation. Accordingly, while Arctic exceptionalism was originally used to advance the cause of peace across the region, our analysis illustrates how Arctic exceptionalist logic is also used to support narratives that portend future *conflict* and thus call for extraordinary action to defend the Arctic as a region apart.

Defining *Arctic* Exceptionalism

Oran R. Young and Gail Osherenko, in their landmark book *The Age of the Arctic* (1992), note that "Arctic exceptionalism" had already emerged "as a powerful force in the world" by 1989 when the Cold War was thawing.[1] The concept stemmed from a "venerable tradition" of outside commentators "accentuating the exotic and unique features of the Arctic," which had "the effect of setting the region aside from the

mainstream concerns of most fields of study."[2] In their framing, Arctic exceptionalism is rooted in "Arctic sublime": the idea that the region is "at once beautiful and terrifying, awesome and exotic, a world apart, a romantic, last frontier offering compelling opportunities and exhilarating risk."[3] In turn, Arctic states linked this romanticism to identity politics, constructing narratives that incorporated visions of the region as a source of spiritual flow, national hardiness, a final frontier to be conquered through nation-building efforts, or a "land of tomorrow" that demanded exceptional protection.[4]

During the Cold War, the Soviet and American camps had built an ice curtain through the Arctic region and locked it into the ideological and geo-strategic contest between the superpowers that inhibited cooperation across the East-West divide. Mikhail Gorbachev's much-celebrated 1987 Murmansk Speech called for a new approach in foreign policy, aspiring for the Arctic to become a "zone of peace." Although Western commentators treated the policy initiatives emanating from the Kremlin with skepticism, the prospect of de-militarizing the Arctic agenda opened space to consider political, economic, and environmental issues previously subordinated to military security interests. In Canada, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's Conservative government (1984-93) shifted from a strong sovereignty and military emphasis in the mid-1980s to propose an Arctic Council of circumpolar cooperation that would foster peace and normalize political engagement on issues of common concern. "It would be no small accomplishment for Canada to bring Russia onto the world stage in its first multilateral negotiation since the formation of the Soviet Union," University of Toronto professor Franklyn Griffiths wrote in 1991—particularly if it was geared towards "a new instrument for civility and indeed civilized behaviour in relations between Arctic states, between these states and their aboriginal peoples, and in the way southern majorities treat their vulnerable northern environment."[5]

Young and Osherenko observe that the Murmansk Speech encouraged the Arctic states, which had "developed policies regarding their own part of the Arctic with little regard for other parts of the Arctic region," to conceptualize a common *region* where they had "much in common with each other."[6] As the world shifted from Cold War bipolarity to American unipolarity, a steady stream of regional initiatives emerged in the Arctic that offered attractive case studies "for those seeking to

formulate and test generic propositions about sustained cooperation in international society."[7] Forming "mutually beneficial regimes" could offer "an effective method of resolving otherwise intractable disputes" that transcended state boundaries—especially those between former adversaries.[8] The collective action problems associated with Arctic environmental issues, which no one state could address alone, were particularly apt to being tackled through this approach.

Political scientist Clive Thomas observed that Young did not base his analysis of regime formation on the argument of Arctic exceptionalism—"the belief that political forms and problems are distinct, even unique, in the Arctic and have no counterparts elsewhere." Instead, Young conceptualized "the Arctic as a testing ground," where novel approaches to managing political issues and developing regional governance could yield important lessons and insights for other parts of the world. This concerned "[I]ndigenous peoples, the resolution of conflicts between the values of development and environmental protection, and international cooperation on such topics as fishing rights, animal migration and the preservation of cross-border ecosystems in general."[9] While the region had distinctive hallmarks that allowed it to serve as a "testing ground," its "exceptionalism" had to be tempered for regional dynamics or experiments to offer broader lessons.

For most commentators, however, the idea of "Arctic exceptionalism" became inextricably linked to the twin assumptions that the region was a cohesive and cooperative space insulated from geopolitical tensions elsewhere, and that it was "exceptional" when compared to other regions.[10] Heather Exner-Pirot and Robert Murray define the concept as "the successful effort" both "to maintain cooperation in the region despite internal competition for resources and territory," and "to compartmentalize Arctic relations from external geopolitical tensions." They argue that the Arctic regional order is exceptional insofar as Arctic states and those states with involvement in the area have worked "to negotiate an order and balance of power predicated on norms such as cooperation and multilateralism." In short, they insist that the regional regime is exceptionally predicated on peace and cooperation. While "the Arctic is not immune from the possibility of war and conflict," they suggest that the peaceful regional order "can be disrupted if Arctic international society does not take conscious steps to maintain a strong institutional framework that protects Arctic internationalism."[11] In

other words, Arctic exceptionalism is directly linked with norms-based multilateralism and institutionalism.

International relations professor Lassi Heininen, a consummate proponent of conventional Arctic exceptionalist thinking, has recently reiterated his argument that:

> the globalized Arctic is an exceptional political space in world politics and international relations, based on intensive international, functional cooperation and high geopolitical stability.… This stability does not result from either the classical approach of Great-Game geopolitics or the Hobbesian zero-sum approach. It results from applying a critical and constructivist approach to geopolitics. It combines Gorbachev's (1987) realist concept of the eight Arctic states as a "zone of peace," Arctic globalization, and critical approaches of (state) sovereignty and traditional powers by local, regional and global (non-state) actors, emphasizing immaterial values and that the environment matters.[12]

In short, Heininen's Arctic is exceptional because it specifically embodies the emancipatory spirit of critical geopolitics via non-state actors, emphasizes a shared experience through constructivism, and rejects the power politics of realism. He thus instrumentalizes "Arctic exceptionalism" to serve his complex ontological preferences, constructing it as an "exceptional political space" that is apart from but connected to the rest of the world (and thus can be insulated from global tensions if managed through functionalist liberal institutions[13]).

With the end of Cold War antagonism, Wilfrid Greaves observes how "the rapid transformation of the Arctic from a space of conflictual to cooperative political behaviour led to excited assessments of the circumpolar region as geopolitically unique."[14] Similarly, Heininen, Exner-Pirot and Murray suggest that this context produced an exceptional Arctic regime—one which accounts for regional peace and stability over the last three decades. Encapsulating this view, Juha Käpylä and Harri Mikkola note that the geographical and political distance between the Arctic and the southern metropoles that governed it facilitated the characterization of "a unique region detached, and encapsulated, from global political dynamics, and thus characterized primarily as an apolitical space of regional governance, functional cooperation, and peaceful co-existence."[15]

Others have been less convinced by this line of argument. In 2005, Young referred to a "mosaic of cooperation" in the region: a web of issue-specific arrangements rather than the "single comprehensive and integrated regime covering an array of issues that constitute the region's policy agenda" as he himself and others had earlier envisaged. Arrangements were driven by consensus and 'soft law' to "promote cooperation, coordination and interaction" and to produce and disseminate knowledge. "However important these roles may be in the long run," Young concluded, "they do not conform to normal conceptions of the functions of international regimes."[16]

In a tidy definition, Michael T. Bravo describes Arctic exceptionalism as scholars treating the Arctic "as a regional security complex with its own, independent, political calculus that is poorly explained by conventional realist theories of international relations."[17] The nature of this security complex remains open to debate. Exner-Pirot suggests that "the Arctic is exceptional in that the environmental sector dominates circumpolar relations," making it, in effect, a regional *environmental* security complex.[18] By marginalizing traditional military and security issues, the Arctic exceptionalism embedded in these articulations of an Arctic security complex also creates vulnerability in suggesting that the reintroduction of defence considerations inherently undermines them. Furthermore, by prescribing that the logic of exceptionalism points to a certain type of regime predicated on liberal institutionalism, we might overlook different ways that other commentators—rooted in other schools of thought—also identify "exceptional" characteristics to justify or explain national behaviour and regional dynamics.

Exceptional Danger: The Opening of a "New Ocean"

The very language of describing the Arctic as an "emerging region" or "new ocean" is in itself exceptional.[19] Summer sea ice coverage is at historical lows owing to anthropogenic climate change. This means that more water in parts of the Arctic Ocean is in a liquid rather than solid state for longer periods. This does not change the fact that it is water. As such, labelling it a "new ocean" is simply a discursive tactic.

Debates about Arctic sovereignty and the potential dangers associated with the "opening" of the region remained largely academic until

they intersected more recently with peril-ridden popular perceptions about competition for Arctic resources. Record lows in the extent of summer sea ice, combined with record high oil prices, uncertainty over maritime boundaries (pushed to the fore by the Russian underwater flag planting at the North Pole in 2007), and the much-hyped U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) estimate released in 2008 suggesting that the region holds 13 per cent of the world's undiscovered oil and 30 per cent of its undiscovered natural gas, conspired to drive Arctic issues to the forefront of international politics in 2007 and 2008. In this context, some commentators suggested that the Arctic remained a vast *terra nullius* devoid of stable regional governance: there was no overarching regional treaty like that which guaranteed peace and stability in Antarctica since 1959, and the United States had never ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982. In Canada and Russia, some nationalistic voices demanded urgent state action to defend this "frontier" from outside aggressors in a "race for resources." Such messages tended to conflate identity politics, national interests, continental shelf delimitation processes, energy security, mineral resources, and security and control over Arctic jurisdictions.

Raising the spectre of conflict, these ideas projected a logic of "Arctic exceptionalism" rather different from that advanced by the liberal internationalist school outlined above. "Purveyors of polar peril"[20] such as Rob Huebert (Canada) and Scott Borgerson (U.S.) spoke of an "Arctic arms race" emanating from regional resource and sovereignty issues rather than global strategic drivers.[21] While ostensibly arguing that the Arctic was not immune to conflict and thus challenging an existing form of Arctic exceptionalist logic, they constructed the region as a distinct geostrategic and geopolitical space by isolating and insulating particular "Arctic" variables that they suggested required distinct *regional* analysis. Ironically, strategic analysts looking at other parts of the world might suggest that the very drivers these Arctic alarmists held up as predictors of regional conflict would probably lead them to anticipate cooperation (or at least non-conflict) based on grand strategic considerations and national interests involved. Why predict the likelihood of conflict in a region where the vast majority of resources fall within clearly-defined national jurisdictions and where Arctic coastal states stand to gain the most from mutual respect for sovereignty and sovereign rights? Only by rendering the Arctic "exceptional" would

states act against their explicit interests. Why would the delineation of the outermost limits of extended continental shelves in the Arctic be particularly contentious compared to other parts of the world? Arguments seldom advanced to this level of sophistication, apart from implicit suggestions that the Arctic region was somehow different; one marked by a high degree of geopolitical uncertainty because it was "opening" to the world and changing beyond recognition.

In short, the alarmist "scramble for the Arctic" narrative was inherently predicated on a form of exceptionalism positing that the Arctic Ocean was different than every other ocean—a narrative that inherently questioned Arctic state rights and control under established rules. The May 2008 Ilulissat Declaration by the Arctic littoral countries (Canada, United States, Russia, Norway and Denmark/Greenland), which was both an expression of national self-interests and an affirmation of international law and institutions, "normalized" the Arctic Ocean. Although it asserted that "by virtue of their sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in large areas of the Arctic Ocean the five coastal states are in a *unique position* [emphasis added] to address … possibilities and challenges [in the region]," the "Arctic-5" offered the framework as "a solid foundation for responsible management by the five coastal States *and other users of this Ocean* [emphasis added] through national implementation and application of relevant provisions" of international law. The Arctic was not a lawless frontier, and coastal state sovereignties and sovereign rights were well scripted under international legal frameworks with global application. The declaration promised "the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims"[22] because all Arctic coastal states had vested interests in maintaining a low-tension environment where their rights are recognized. While news media continued to pedal sensationalist conflict and "race for resource" stories that generated public interest, most official statements from the Arctic states themselves downplayed these exceptionalist narratives about uncertain boundaries, rampant militarization, or a repeat of a "Wild West" rush for resources leading to conflict. By scripting the region within accepted international norms and legal frameworks, the Arctic states could speak of "their" Arctic region as unique without calling into question whether international rules applied there as elsewhere.

For the Arctic states, however, relinquishing "Arctic exceptionalism" meant accepting a broader array of stakeholders—and international

rightsholders—particularly in discussions related to areas beyond national jurisdiction. Canada and Russia, in particular, preferred a "closed sea" approach to managing circumpolar issues, with the Arctic coastal states dealing with Arctic Ocean issues in bilateral or Arctic-5 formats, and the Arctic-8 running the Arctic Council in close dialogue with Indigenous Permanent Participants. Debates about extending so-called "permanent" observer status at the Council to Asian states and the European Union (EU) reinforced the limits of regional "exceptionalism." Discussions around climate change, resources, and sea routes that drew connections between the Arctic and other regions highlighted tensions, and even hypocrisy, with Arctic states' desire to treat the region as apart from, rather than a part of, global considerations. For example, according to international law, achieving enforceable norms, rules, and standards for the Central Arctic Ocean (CAO) area beyond national jurisdiction involves the rights of Arctic and non-Arctic stakeholders. The recent move from an "Arctic-5" fisheries agreement to an "Arctic 5 + 5" format (the coastal states plus China, the EU, Iceland, Japan and South Korea) to negotiate the 2018 Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean is a prime example. The precautionary principle that animates these agreements might serve as an example of exceptional practice (or a best practice that should be applied elsewhere), but the necessity of coastal states cooperating with other stakeholders in ocean governance beyond their national jurisdiction reflects global rather than regional requirements.[23]

Polar Exceptionalism: The Arctic-Antarctic Analogy

Early twenty-first century discussions on climate change, the protection of the marine environment, and the "opening" of the region precipitated various calls for a new comprehensive international legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean, often predicated on another form of Arctic or polar exceptionalism. Some academics began to assert that the soft-law approach to regional governance could not effectively manage challenges related to climate change, resource development, and increased shipping. Accordingly, advocates across the ideological spectrum promoted stronger regional institutions with legal powers or an ambitious new Arctic treaty architecture modeled on the Antarctic Treaty, and a controversial resolution of the European Parliament in

October 2008 called specifically for the latter.[24] The Antarctic Treaty had been designed to deal with the exceptional circumstances around the south pole. By linking the Arctic to its southern counterpart, the implication was that a stable and unique regime designed for Antarctica could be applied to the other polar region.

The "polar exceptionalism" argument fell apart when commentators emphasized the simple geographical reality that Antarctica is a continent with no permanent human residents, while the Arctic Ocean is a maritime space already covered by the UNCLOS where coastal states enjoy well-established and internationally-recognized sovereign rights. It was unreasonable to think that the Arctic states could see the Antarctic Treaty as an appropriate model, given that it was deliberately designed to hold sovereignty claims in abeyance. Subsequent statements by the European Commission proved more sober in recognizing that "an extensive international legal framework is already in place that applies to the Arctic,"[25] and the 2016 EU policy similarly recognized that the UNCLOS "provides a framework for managing the Arctic Ocean, including the peaceful settlement of disputes."[26] Differentiating the Arctic from the Antarctic has reduced the appeal of "polar" exceptionalism logic suggesting the applicability of governance regimes in one region to the other, while simultaneously emphasizing established global rules and norms around state sovereignty and sovereign rights in the Circumpolar North.

Asserting Exceptionalism: Canada, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, and an Indigenous Homeland

Another strand of Arctic exceptionalism, largely promoted by Canada and reflected in the design and practices of the Arctic Council since 1996, builds upon the idea of the region as an "Indigenous homeland." This is due to the high proportion of Indigenous peoples in the North American Arctic (and particularly Inuit in the region north of the treeline). Indeed, by the early 1990s, Northern Indigenous leaders re-emerged as a strong political force in Canada, Alaska, and Greenland. The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), representing Inuit as a transnational people living in four Arctic states, insisted that they had a primary responsibility and right as Indigenous peoples to chart a course for Arctic regional affairs, as did various First Nations and Métis groups in

Canada's Northern Territories.[27] As Carina Keskitalo astutely observed, after the end of the East-West conflict, "Canada developed a specific understanding of its 'Arctic' quite early" which went beyond the Arctic Ocean and its immediate vicinity to encompass its entire Northern territories above 60° North latitude as "Arctic." In early post-Cold War political negotiations to institutionalize circumpolar relations, Canada also articulated an understanding of the Arctic in both environmental and human terms (rooted in Indigenous subsistence-based livelihoods) that deeply influenced the region-building process. As Keskitalo highlighted, Canada's "historically developed notions of 'the Arctic' have been transplanted to northern areas everywhere, with little reflection on whether it is applicable to the different regions or not."[28]

When the Canadian government spearheaded the push for a comprehensive polar regime—one framed largely by Canadian civil society actors of the early 1990s—the goal was to bring "civility" to a region that had been largely frozen out of international politics during the Cold War. The idea was for an "Arctic Council" to produce binding agreements, thereby forming a new regional institution that would help integrate the post-Soviet Russian Federation into the liberal international order[29] while granting representatives of Indigenous peoples equal status to Arctic governments. Crucially, the initial proposals insisted that the Council's mandate should include military security (with the ultimate hope of creating an "Arctic Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone").[30] These proposals reflected a Canadian belief that the "exceptional" characteristics of the Arctic (as Ottawa imagined the region) necessitated innovation in international governance to reflect Indigenous rights and interests, and that its distinctiveness invited the possibility to implement arms control ideas there that had not gained traction elsewhere.

The United States, however, rejected the logic that "Arctic exceptionalism" somehow justified these extraordinary measures—particularly the regional, Arctic-specific arms control regime envisaged by Canada. Staunchly defending their core strategic interests from foreign interference, American negotiators stated that including hard military discussions at an Arctic Council would limit their counter-force options in a region where Russia based most of its nuclear weapons. From the U.S. perspective, military capabilities in the region were inextricably linked to global deterrence and power projection options.

Washington guarded its interests, and as a result the Ottawa Declaration that created the Council in 1996 specified that it "should not deal with matters related to military security."[31] Furthermore, the United States ensured that Permanent Participants were not voting members of the Council akin to the Arctic states and that the participation of Indigenous peoples at the Council did not imply an acknowledgement of their rights to self-determination under international law. Furthermore, the United States successfully lobbied to broaden the number of North American Permanent Participants beyond the ICC to include the "distinctly different environmental concerns and interests" as well as the "cultural uniqueness" of Aleut and Athabascan communities.[32] In short, the United States did not share Canada's vision of Arctic exceptionalism, and the Arctic Council that ultimately emerged generally reflected American constraints.

This reading of the historical record, with the United States modifying Canadian designs for regional institution-building (based on a vision of "Arctic exceptionalism") qualifies just how exceptional we might view the regime that has actually appeared. While the role of Permanent Participants in the Arctic Council represents an important innovation in international governance that is celebrated by everyone involved in the forum's activities, Arctic states remained firmly atop the regional hierarchy with full, formal decision-making authority. Thus, when U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered his May 2019 speech to the Arctic Council Ministerial suggesting expansion of the forum's mandate to include a new military security role that could help hold revisionist actors like China and Russia "accountable" in the region,[33] it represented an ironic reversal of a longstanding American position. Yet, Pompeo's statement was not predicated on any sense of Arctic exceptionalism, but simply driven by a desire to link the Arctic Council's deliberations to increasing global strategic competition.

Asserting Arctic Exceptionalism: The Russian Case

Russia has been the most determined Arctic player for nearly a century. As such, its own sense of "Arctic exceptionalism" flows from a conviction that only it "has the necessary experience and knowledge to contribute to the economic and social development of the region and to the protection of its ecosystem."[34] Russia has declared that it

intends to transform the Arctic into its "foremost strategic base for natural resources" and that dramatically expanding shipping along the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is a top priority; indeed, President Putin called in August 2019 for annual shipments to reach 80 million tons by 2024.[35] Furthermore, identity politics factor strongly into the domestic discourse, with nationalist commentators continuing to frame the Russian North as a territory that embodies the Russian spirit of heroism and perseverance. In this light, the Arctic represents Russia's "last chance" at "conquering" and "owning" it—as a way to take "revenge on history," as compensation for the loss of Russian hegemony when the Soviet Union fell apart.[36] The Kremlin's official messaging on regional affairs thus reflects both assertive rhetoric about protecting its national interests as well as upholding the Arctic as an international "zone of peace" and "territory of dialogue." Considering that Russia's dependency on Arctic resource extraction requires regional stability, as well as the entrenched belief that the United States intends to "keep Russia down" and that the Western (i.e. NATO's) military presence in the Arctic reflects anti-Russian strategic agendas,[37] this dual messaging is not surprising. A decade ago, President Dmitry Medvedev told his security council that, "regrettably, we have seen attempts to limit Russia's access to the exploration and development of the Arctic mineral resources. That's absolutely inadmissible from the legal viewpoint and unfair given our nation's geographical location and history."[38] While Western sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of its illegal actions in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea in 2014 might seem to support this narrative (particularly those targeting Russia's offshore energy sector), these did not arise from Arctic dynamics.

Given that Russia perceives itself to have "exceptional" interests in the Circumpolar North, is this reflected in a distinct approach to the region? Is such an approach aimed at preserving the status quo or about geostrategic revisionism? Some commentators insist that Russia's military modernization programs in the Arctic represent an aggressive buildup aimed at regional domination, while others point to "dual-use" and "soft security" applications that pose no threat to regional stability.[39]

It is certain that revisionist moves that undermine Arctic state sovereignty or sovereign rights would have disproportionately negative impacts on Russia, thus making military confrontation in the region

unlikely on the grounds of Russian national self-interest. As Katarzyna Zysk astutely observed: "One of the region's biggest assets as a promising site for energy exploration and maritime transportation is stability … Given the economic importance of the Arctic to Russia it is likely that leaders will avoid actions that might undermine the region's long-term stability and security."[40] In turn, Pavel Baev has argued that there is no all-encompassing Russian frame for the international Arctic region. Instead, the country's "highly heterogenous" Arctic policy reflects different policy modes (realist/militaristic, institutional/cooperative, and diplomatic management) that are each rooted in "a particular interpretation of Russia's various interests in the High North/Arctic: nuclear/ strategic, geopolitical, economic/energy-related, and symbolic." This creates an inherent dialectic between *status quo* and "revisionist" impulses. Baev concludes that the Kremlin's "current policy still attaches high value to sustaining traditional patterns [of cooperation], even if they demand more resources and provide fewer advantages and revenues."[41] This reflects domestic politics and national self-interest more than any ideological commitment to "Arctic exceptionalism" rooted in post Cold War internationalism.[42]

Demanding Exceptionalism? China as "Threat" to Arctic States

The rise of China and the shift to multipolarity has dominated international relations discourse over the last twenty years,[43] prompting various regional narratives to try to frame and understand specific Chinese intentions. Polar narratives of China's rising interests as a "near-Arctic state" and its future designs for the region have become a staple of the burgeoning literature on Arctic security and governance over the last decade. For some scholars, China represents an inherently benign actor, either as a country with no pernicious designs for the region[44] (perhaps a naïve case of "Arctic exceptionalism" given its behavior elsewhere in the world) or as one seeking to play a constructive role in circumpolar affairs and Arctic development in accordance with established norms.[45] Other authors have cast strong suspicion at Beijing, arguing that this Asian great power is embarking on a "long-con" or "bait-and-switch" strategy where it will seek to undermine the sovereignty of Arctic states and co-opt regional governance mechanisms to

facilitate access to resources and new sea routes to fuel and connect its growing global empire.[46]

Expressions of Western concern usually cite unofficial statements from Chinese commentators who describe the existing Arctic governance system as insufficient or unfair and call for fundamental revision—a direct contradiction of the messaging in China's official policy.[47] Indications a decade ago that China sought "common heritage of mankind" status for the Arctic Ocean were predicated on either a Chinese form of Arctic exceptionalism (that it was distinct from every other ocean on earth) or a poor articulation of the idea that the Central Arctic Ocean, beyond national jurisdiction, constituted "The Area" under UNCLOS. In this light, rather than seeing the revised Arctic Council criteria for observer status in 2013 as merely a self-interested move by the Arctic states to preserve their exclusive "club,"[48] it should also be read as an affirmation that global rules apply in the Arctic as they do elsewhere. Insisting that an applicant for observer status "recognizes Arctic States' sovereignty, sovereign rights" and acknowledges that "an extensive legal framework applies to the Arctic Ocean including, notably, the Law of the Sea, and that this framework provides a solid foundation for responsible management of this ocean"[49] is a form of "normalizing" rather than "exceptionalizing" the region in conventional international relations and legal terms.

What Western commentators saw as an initial Chinese push to internationalize the Circumpolar North a decade ago was promptly rebuffed by the Arctic States and ran contrary to Chinese efforts to nationalize the East and South China Seas, leading China to recalibrate its approach.[50] Pushing for regional change beyond the tolerances of the Arctic States would risk major trading relationships that already supply cheaper natural resources from elsewhere than can be secured from the Arctic. China has little to gain from upsetting the Arctic—a region of limited consequence to it compared to other parts of the world—and much to lose.[51] Instead, by refraining from overt repudiations of "Arctic exceptionalism" and playing within the regional governance rules set largely by Arctic states with prestige and influence within the international system, China can win trust and accrue "political capital" through good international behaviour. As part of a global strategy, China may choose to forego its preferences to "internationalize" the Arctic, play by the regional rules to showcase how it abides by

international law and norms, and then make a decisive revisionist move closer to home.

The End of "Arctic Exceptionalism" and a Return to Atlanticism?

Part of the post-Cold War euphoria that allowed proponents of the liberal institutionalist interpretation of Arctic exceptionalism to conceptualize the region as an "exceptional space" flowed from the rapid collapse of the Russian military and the apparent absence of any regional military competition in the Yeltsin era after 1991. By 2007, however, an increasingly confident Russia led by President Vladimir Putin was rebuilding its armed forces with oil and gas revenues, resuming strategic bomber flights in the Arctic, and mounting regional naval operations.[52] Coupled with Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and its increasingly apparent "diplomatic opposition to Western interests,"[53] some commentators chastised what they saw as naïve idealists in the West clinging to "Arctic exceptionalism" when Russia was indicating its intention to return to coercive politics and even unilaterally demarcate and defend its Arctic borders.[54]

Through a Russian strategic lens, the Arctic, North Atlantic, and North Pacific constitute a single operational zone in which to counter U.S. and NATO strategic forces. For the Russian Northern Fleet and strategic bomber forces the Arctic region is a "bastion" of deterrence and defense or a thoroughfare to project power—all to maintain global strategic balance. In the Western sector of the Russian Arctic, land and air forces stand ready against NATO (particularly Norwegian) capabilities, while the conventional component of the Northern Fleet protects Russia's economic interests in the Barents Sea and offers support/auxiliary services to nuclear forces. The Northern Fleet and the Murmansk Command of the Border Guards also protect the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Arctic Ocean coastline, while the Pacific Fleet and the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky Command of the Border Guards control the Bering Sea, Bering Strait, and access to the Chukchi Sea.[55] Thus, although one lens leads Russia to view its Arctic as a distinct domestic space that needs to be defended and protected from external encroachment, another sees it as a core element in its broader geostrategic map of the world.[56]

Debates within NATO since 2007 center on whether the alliance should adopt an explicit Arctic policy. With Russian military activity on the rise, Norway and Iceland began to push for NATO to rebuild its conventional military capabilities for the Arctic and affirm that its collective security provisions applied to the region as they did elsewhere.[57] Other NATO members suggested that because the prospect of conflict in the Arctic was overblown, the threat environment did not warrant specific attention. Indeed, exceptional attention to that region might distract from more important considerations elsewhere. Furthermore, if Russia was unlikely to attack its Arctic neighbors and there was no prospect of military conflict among the other Arctic states, why have NATO emphasize its Arctic interests? This would unnecessarily provoke Russia and play into primordial Russian fears about NATO bullying.[58] Canada stood firm against an explicit NATO role. In 2014, for example, Prime Minister Stephen Harper explicitly opposed elevating the Arctic on NATO's agenda, insisting that the alliance had "no role" in the region, while, as he saw it, pressure for greater involvement was coming from non-Arctic members that sought to exert their influence in a region "where they don't belong."[59] According to this line of argument, Canada saw the Arctic security environment as one best managed by the Arctic states themselves.

Canada's most recent change in tune on NATO's Arctic role reflects a more nuanced blend of Arctic exceptionalism and global strategic competition. While careful to acknowledge the rights and legitimate national interests of all Arctic states, Canada's 2017 defense policy highlights Russia's role in the resurgence of major power competition globally and concomitant implications for peace and security: "NATO Allies and other like-minded states have been re-examining how to deter a wide spectrum of challenges to the international order by maintaining advanced conventional military capabilities that could be used in the event of a conflict with a 'near-peer.'" Highlighting that "NATO has also increased its attention to Russia's ability to project force from its Arctic territory into the North Atlantic, and its potential to challenge NATO's collective defence posture," the policy emphasizes that "Canada and its NATO Allies have been clear that the Alliance will be ready to deter and defend against any potential threats, including against sea lines of communication and maritime approaches to Allied territory in the North Atlantic."[60] The

inclusion of this reference—as well as the commitment to "support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO"[61]—represents a significant shift in Canada's official position. No longer does Arctic exceptionalism preclude an acknowledgement of the Western alliance's regional interests to sustain Arctic peace and stability.

By linking the Arctic to the North Atlantic, the Canadian policy statement restores aspects of a pre-exceptionalist Cold War mental map that acknowledged the interconnectedness between the Arctic and the North Atlantic through the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap. The Trump administration also has signalled renewed interest in the North Atlantic-Arctic artery by re-establishing the U.S. Navy's 2nd Fleet in 2018, returning to the Keflavik air base in Iceland, and (most notoriously) proposing to purchase Greenland from the Kingdom of Denmark in 2019. While more frequent references to "Arctic" security might suggest the entire Circumpolar North as the "referent object" (securitization jargon for the area or ideal that is threatened and needs protection), it is revealing to explore which "Arctic" North American commentators are describing. When Canadians and Americans speak of an enhanced NATO role in the Arctic, they implicitly mean the European rather than the North American Arctic—the latter a distinct, even exceptional, space where Canada and the United States have always preferred bilateral or binational approaches to continental defense, whereas the former includes the smaller Nordic countries with Russia and its heavily-militarized Kola Peninsula, home of the Northern Fleet, a mere stone's throw away.[62]

Reflections

Marrying the more "romantic" notions of the region with regime theory, conventional applications of "Arctic exceptionalism" since the 1990s have sought and served to isolate the Arctic as a political region apart from, rather than a part of, international relations writ large. Instead of taking the dominant liberal internationalism definition and employment of "Arctic exceptionalism" as *the* (singular) "proper" articulation of the concept, we observe several "Arctic *exceptionalisms*" at play in recent debates—scholarly and political—about the so-called Arctic regime and its place in the broader world order. We suggest

that the logic of exceptionalism inherently warrants greater scholarly attentiveness to what *specific attributes* commentators emphasize when arguing that this particular space is different, if not unique, from elsewhere, and what motivation lies behind their assertion of this "exceptional" status.

Although polymorphic in expression, Arctic exceptionalisms share a common element: that the Arctic is a political *region*. This has not changed since Osherenko and Young offered their initial observation thirty years ago. Since that time, ideas about Arctic exceptionalism have diverged along two primary axes.

The first axis is that of cooperation and conflict. While the conventional interpretation of Arctic exceptionalism posits the region to be a place of peace and cooperation, others argue that the Arctic is a dangerous powder keg for reasons that one might not predict when examining the international system as a whole. Thus, rather than a single unifying concept, we find that some forms of Arctic exceptionalism reject the notion of the Arctic as "a zone of peace," and that we should ask where various assertions about the region's "uniqueness" fall on the cooperation-conflict continuum. Initial notions of exceptional Arctic "civility" were developed in response to conflict and division in a bipolar world, and "purveyors of polar peril" developed their concept of the Arctic as a place of exceptional danger in an era of unipolarity characterized by cooperation and cosmopolitanism. Arctic exceptionalism was, and still is, about seeking to envisage and promote a desired *cooperative* future—or to warn against an undesirable *conflictual* one.

Accordingly, we view "Arctic exceptionalism" as a discursive strategy to differentiate specific desired traits or dynamics associated with the Arctic, rather than an observation of objective reality. Given our expectation that the Arctic will continue to serve as a "testing ground" of ideas to manage political issues, much as it has for theorists like Young, we anticipate that this discursive approach will facilitate more nuanced and robust analysis of when, why, and how different actors invoke "exceptional" regional characteristics to explain relationships and behaviors, predict prospects for cooperation or conflict, and frame desired futures. We also caution that, while Russia-NATO tension at the international level has not undermined institutions such as the Arctic Council or regional circumpolar stability more generally,[63] this does

not necessarily prove the existence of an Arctic regime or even of "Arctic exceptionalism." Presupposing that regional peace and stability flow from an exceptional Arctic regime, or that a regional regime must be constructed to serve this goal (rather than from an increasingly complex and interwoven "mosaic of cooperation"),[64] still factors heavily in many exceptionalist narratives.

The second axis of divergence is that of nationalism. While many proponents of "Arctic exceptionalism" (in both the liberal and realist camps, but for different reasons) may find the notion that Arctic states' national self-interests can explain circumpolar stability and the comparative absence of regional conflict to be normatively frustrating, we suggest that nationalisms and state interests lie behind other expressions of exceptionalism. In the future, we suggest that analysts pose the question: how might major powers use Arctic exceptionalism to further their national interests in a changing world order? For example, Russia's diminished military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities have constrained its ambitions since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its international efforts are largely directed to its "near-abroad" (its former empire). As the largest Arctic state by every metric, it is logical that it will continue to try and imprint its notions of Arctic exceptionalism onto the region, attempting to steer the region, and its interests therein, away from the international pressures bearing down on Russia for its actions elsewhere in its near-abroad (such as Ukraine). Similarly, while Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland will continue to pay influential roles within the Arctic Council and other regional fora, their ability to sustain "Arctic exceptionalist" *peace* narratives—particularly in the conventional liberal internationalist vein—will be challenged by notions of major power competition globally.

Thus, we anticipate that future notions of Arctic exceptionalism should be charted by how the axis of conflict and cooperation intersects with the axis of cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. While some notions of Arctic exceptionalism are cosmopolitan, with diverse peoples developing universal codes of 'civility' around which to govern the region, others are far more communitarian. Here Russia's language of "conquering" and "owning" the Arctic represents an extreme form of communitarianism. Other exceptionalisms, such as those arguing that only Russia has the capabilities needed to lead the region's economic

and social development, or that Canada must foist its domestic preferences onto regional governance mechanisms, land more in the midrange of the nationalism spectrum. Indigenous peoples of the region, in turn, will continue to articulate their own form of exceptionalism, characterizing the region first and foremost as a transnational Indigenous homeland. While we expect that their voices will continue to resonate in their home states and in the Arctic Council, and innovative governance practices in and between some Arctic states may serve as precedents as international legal rights and norms evolve globally, these very dynamics could also serve as perceived threats to state interests in other parts of the world where Indigenous rights are not as respected.

Ironically, commentators who see China as an inherently respectful contributor to regional governance and development, and those who see it as a predatory power embarking on a long-term revisionist strategy for the region, often rely on "Arctic exceptionalist" logic to build their case. It is striking that alarmist Western commentators often seem surprised that China, as an emerging global power, would be interested in Arctic maritime routes, natural resources, and governance. Their implicit expectations operate from the normative assumption that China should view the Arctic as "exceptional"—that it is the preserve of the Arctic states with a distinct set of rules and governance practices that leave no room for "outsiders." This runs counter to broader international norms and legal realities, as well as an ethos of openness and inclusiveness. Chinese declarations that it is a "near Arctic state" and that it aspires to become a "great polar power" clearly indicate that the country has strategic interests in the region, but they do not portend that it will seek to achieve them through military force or overtly revisionist behavior designed to undermine regional governance institutions. Nevertheless, we expect that rising states with international ambitions will play notions of Arctic exceptionalism to their advantage. Their aspirations and possible behaviors must be considered as part of a larger global game in which the Arctic represents but a minor piece. Perhaps the biggest obstacle for the Arctic states is that the unrealized promise of an internationalist "Arctic exceptionalism" has left them ill-equipped to integrate China— a major, exogenous authoritarian power with substantial resources and growing global influence—into their mental map of an "exceptional" region.

Different notions of exceptionalism may also sow discord between Arctic states with distinct regional preferences and the United States with its global responsibilities. For example, could a return to promoting regional arms control cooperation undermine American options and strategic messaging in an era of increasing major power competition? Do cosmopolitan notions of Arctic exceptionalism put the region at odds with an America that increasingly places itself first? Similarly, might China espouse Russian versions of Arctic exceptionalism to pull its northern neighbor further into the Middle Kingdom's orbit? Will Indigenous peoples' articulations of exceptionalism, rooted in communitarianism, eventually see their narratives of transnational cooperation and self-determination come into friction and/or conflict with those advanced by the national governments of the Arctic states?

With Russia unlikely to re-emerge as a major global player in the next two decades, the United States will retain its role as "moderator," tempering Arctic exceptionalist approaches with its international realities and American responsibilities therein. Recent language emphasizing that the "homeland is not a sanctuary," and that North Americans can no longer see the Arctic as a natural barrier against threats from multiple domains, directly rebuke ideas that the region can be sustained as a "zone of peace" in an era of resurgent global strategic competition (and climate change). U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in a provocative speech at the Arctic Council Ministerial in Rovaniemi in May 2019, bluntly derided Russia and China (as well as Canada in separate comments) for disrespecting and violating what the Trump administration interprets as the rule of law and Arctic state rights. "We're entering a new age of strategic engagement in the Arctic, complete with new threats to the Arctic and its real estate, and to all of our interests in that region," he declared.[65] Despite China's apparently reassuring 2018 "Arctic White Paper," which committed to respect regional peace and stability as well as Arctic state sovereignty, Pompeo insisted that "China's words and actions raise doubts about its intentions."

Gao Feng, China's special representative for the Arctic and head of the Chinese delegation at the Arctic Council ministerial, lamented the affront. "The business of the Arctic Council is cooperation, environmental protection, friendly consultation and the sharing and exchange of views," he extolled. "This is completely different now."[66] If the ideals of Arctic exceptionalism embodied in the Arctic Council represent a

"luxury" that Americans "no longer" have (as Pompeo suggested), the question remains of whether—or for how long—the United States will continue to sustain "exceptional" frameworks that partially insulate the Arctic from global pressures and adopt careful language to avoid provoking regional conflict.

As international interest in the Circumpolar North continues to grow, we anticipate that the Arctic states will continue to turn to various articulations of regional exceptionalism when broader global laws and norms fail to protect their distinct regional and national interests. Concurrently, various narratives of "Arctic exceptionalism" may continue to encourage good international behaviour in the region, even if major power competition continues to generate conflict elsewhere. As humanity comes to terms with new realities in the Anthropocene, leaders of both Arctic and non-Arctic states may find common interest in articulating forms of "Arctic exceptionalism" to justify and prioritize environmental and climatological action that other international structures or mechanisms cannot address. As Jason Dittmer, Sami Moisio, Alan Ingram, and Klaus Dodds wrote: "It is not climate change and Arctic exceptionalism that produce geopolitical interventions, it is the identification of climate change as a security issue, and the subsequent identification of the Arctic as a space of exception, that enable geopolitical intervention."[67]

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Notes

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