

# Ties that Bind: The Emerging Regional Security Complex in the Arctic

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## Introduction

During the 1990s, when 'globalisation' first appeared in both academic and policy thinking, it became fashionable to discuss the 'death of distance' in international relations. The proliferation of modern transportation and communications technologies along with the spread of industries and the liberalisation of trade have all had a significant impact on the entire world and the effects of the various types of globalisation are increasingly visible including in the Arctic. The suggestion that the world was becoming 'flat' due to these advances gained much currency in both policy circles and media.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the end of the cold war and the eventual repositioning of the United States as the remaining global superpower were also reasons cited for an erosion of geography in strategic thinking. The combination of open markets, trade liberalisation, and a downgrading of zero-sum strategic thinking on an international scale during that decade even led to talk about 'virtual states' which were more concerned with developing economic strengths than obtaining land. Although there were some residual conflicts over territory, such as the 1990s Croatian and Bosnian conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, these were largely exceptions rather than indicators.<sup>2</sup> Competition over land along with geographic considerations of security, was not vanishing but was definitely becoming subordinate to the affairs of globalisation.

In the Arctic, however, the idea of a 'flattening' political-economic system runs headlong into the stark reality of its distinct geography. While globalising forces have not left this

region untouched, the limitations of the various strands of globalisation, including economic and technological, are also readily apparent. In a region dominated by small populations, separated by great distances and harsh climatic and geographical conditions despite current trends in climate change, the politics of interconnectivity become much more complicated, and are tempered with the realities of isolation and vulnerability.

As a result of climate change and the erosion of ice in the region, the Arctic has been opened up to greater economic, and consequently, strategic activity. Improved access to energy supplies and raw materials in the region has raised the possibility of competition among Arctic and non-Arctic states for these resources. It can thus be argued that 'the Arctic' can and should now be examined as a distinct region, and that the Arctic is becoming a 'securitized' region, but in a non-traditional fashion reflecting circumpolar geographic realities.

## How to Define Arctic Security?

There have been recent studies which suggest that as the Arctic becomes further globalised and more economically valuable, the region will become militarised. Much of this debate has focussed on Russia, which has been seeking to strengthen its land forces and naval presence in the Arctic in recent years. For example, an August 2015 study suggested that Moscow was seeking to build an 'Ice Curtain' in the region.<sup>3</sup> However, the story does not end with Russia, as the United States and Canada have debated building a stronger military position in the Far North, and there was much discussion in the United States during a transit of the Aleutian

1 Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: The Globalised World in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

2 Richard Rosecrance, 'The Rise of the Virtual State: Territory Becomes Passé,' *Foreign Affairs* 75(4) (July/August 1996): 45-61.

3 'Heather A. Conley and Caroline Rohloff, 'The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic,' *Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 27 August 2015, <[http://csis.org/files/publication/150826\\_Conley\\_NewIceCurtain\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/150826_Conley_NewIceCurtain_Web.pdf)>.

Islands by five Chinese People's Liberation Army Naval vessels in September 2015.<sup>4</sup> Yet although hard power considerations are starting to be viewed more commonly in the Arctic, it is important to place these concerns in context. The Arctic is not a typical region, and the security conditions there are also far from mainstream.

The impediments created by the geographic realities of the Arctic are a major factor in hard security thinking, as well as a more overt 'spillover' of non-Arctic security issues such as current US-Russia strategic differences in Eastern Europe. As a result, Arctic regional differences over security will likely manifest themselves via soft balance of power behaviour. This is normally defined as power balancing without a military dimension, and usually undertaken through organisations and regimes. The geographic and demographic realities of the Arctic strongly discourage hard power balancing or militarisation, and while there are likely to be incidents of spillover of great power and other non-Arctic security concerns into the Far North, indeed Ukraine is now acting as the 'Banquo's ghost' of the region, this is still a far cry from predicting a sharp rise in traditional military behaviour in the Arctic even if the now-delayed 'Arctic boom' does come about in some form in the future.

The distinct structures of the Arctic demonstrate one of the main reasons for soft-balancing behaviour becoming the norm in regional foreign policy both among Arctic states and major powers seeking an Arctic identity, such as China, India and Japan. There is some scholarly debate as to whether great powers can extend their reach effectively across oceans, as such large bodies of water (or ice) can be an impediment to power projection even today.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Arctic, countries large and small have taken a much more development and economics-focused stance in developing regional relations, and there is also a strong degree of peer pressure placed on Arctic states to discourage revisionist or obstructionist behaviour.

Even in the case of Russia, there has been a measured approach to the country's security policies in the north, with military developments limited to acknowledged Russian waters. The ongoing diplomatic wrangling over the status of the Lomonosov ridge will be difficult to resolve, but signs suggest the debate will be restricted to the negotiating tables.<sup>6</sup> There have been steps taken by Moscow to reopen military bases in Siberia and in the Russian Far East and to further add to its already impressive icebreaker fleet. Yet, there needs to be a greater examination of whether those actions can be classified as offensive or defensive in nature, or even 'swaggering', a term used to describe a display of

military materiel for prestige purposes as opposed to a direct strategic aim.<sup>7</sup>

There is a similar situation with non-Arctic states seeking to augment their presence in the Far North, as there is great sensitivity towards 'gate crashing' among some Arctic governments, especially those of Canada and Russia, which have been particularly wary regarding their polar sovereignty. This has been especially the case with China, which joined the Arctic Council as an observer in 2013 and is the largest of the non-Arctic states to have developed a distinct set of Arctic policies. China's rising power has meant that its Arctic strategies have been under consistent scrutiny as compared to those of other observers.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Beijing has also taken great pains to frame its Arctic interests as being defined by scientific and economic areas as opposed to hard security concerns. Overall, as great powers, Arctic and non-Arctic, begin to brush up against each other in the region, the diplomatic norm has been dominated by policies more consistent either with harmony or with 'soft balancing' activities, rather than the first stages of zero-sum, hard power strategies.

### Regionalism Studies: Where Does the Arctic Fit?

Regions, including the Arctic, are often studied using variations of three approaches.<sup>9</sup> The first and most visible is a 'materialist' method, which looks at hard geography, including the benefits of land versus sea power, and the potential benefits a given state may gain from its location. There have been many debates dating as far back as the nineteenth century over whether states, and especially great powers, benefit more from access to land or sea, (or some combination thereof), and during the scramble for overseas colonies among European great powers there was a strong tendency to examine regions in terms of their strategic value. Using a materialist approach to the study of regionalism in the Arctic is very straightforward. Although there are some differences between Arctic states as to where the boundaries of the region are, there is a general consensus as to the main actors and issues.

The second approach, employing 'ideational' methods, places more focus on the role of politics and markets in shaping the perceptions of regions and their behaviour. While regions are often created by political cooperation or rivalry, witness the coalescing of Western and Eastern Europe during much of the cold war, trade can also create regional identities. The European Union could be considered one of the strongest examples of a region being created and shaped through political and economic means. Although geography is not ignored in these sorts of approaches, state behaviour is seen as the major determinant as to the exact definition of a region.

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4 Jeremy Page and Gordon Lubold, 'Chinese Navy Ships Came Within 12 Nautical Miles of U.S. Coast,' *Wall Street Journal*, 4 September 2015.

5 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2001), 41.

6 Roland Oliphant, 'Russia Claims Resource-Rich Swathe of Arctic Territory,' *The Telegraph*, 4 August 2015.

7 Robert J. Art, 'To What Ends Military Power?' *International Security* 4 (Spring 1980): 4-35.

8 Marc Lanteigne, 'The Role of China in Emerging Arctic Security Discourses,' *Sicherheit und Frieden / Security and Peace* 3(2015): 150-5.

9 Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 6-12.

The creation of the Arctic Council and the development of Track II organisations have contributed much to the political regionalisation of the Arctic, but the growing global interest in the region has also forced the question of which non-Arctic states can also make claims to an Arctic identity, and a degree of participation in Arctic affairs. Among the current roster of state observers in the Arctic Council, some observers such as France, Germany and Italy have longstanding Arctic histories. An Arctic White Paper released by the government of Italy in December 2015 was especially noteworthy in its use of historical background as a platform for the country's emerging circumpolar policies.<sup>10</sup> Other observers, such as China, Japan and Singapore, have focussed on their extensive scientific and economic contributions to the Arctic. Japan's Arctic White Paper released in October 2015 and Beijing's 'six-point plan' for the development of Chinese Arctic affairs illustrate this method.<sup>11</sup> The question of the Arctic as a political region has not been completely solved however, as evidenced by the queue of new potential observer nations awaiting the 2017 Arctic Council Ministerial.

The third approach, connected to the second but less rigid in scope, is a behavioural method whereby regions are studied as constantly being shaped and defined in terms of their structure and their identities, through day-to-day politics. To return to the European case, for example, for much of the twentieth century, the cold war distinction between Eastern and Western Europe was largely fixed and politically constructed. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the definition of the two 'Europes' changed dramatically, with the perceived border of 'Eastern' Europe pushed eastward into former Soviet lands, and the concept of a 'Central Europe' was added. When considering major regions of the world, the arguments over how best to describe 'Europe', 'Asia' and other regions are far from settled, either politically or economically.

The Arctic is facing the same questions, especially since the region has moved from relative global obscurity to high visibility since the 1990s, with many actors and several levels of analysis, including indigenous populations, local governments, state governments and regional regimes all contributing to the definition of the Arctic under globalisation. In 2013, the Arctic was being framed as an *Eldorado*, promising great riches and resources. With the Arctic boom over or at least delayed with the fall of fossil fuel and commodity prices, the focus has largely shifted back to climate change and development issues.

### The Arctic as a 'Regional Security Complex'?

Just as it is important not to overstate the role of hard security in current Arctic affairs, it would also be a mistake to define the Arctic via 'asecurity' or a lack of security concerns altogether.<sup>12</sup> The opening of the Arctic, through various avenues such as economics, resources and climate change has meant that the region will become securitised in various forms. The questions which follow involve the responses to Arctic and non-Arctic states to these developments.

It is useful to examine these questions using the model of 'regional security complexes' or RSCs, described as 'a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another.'<sup>13</sup> The 'units' involved are commonly states, but not always so, given the rise of multilateral organisations and other non-state actors in the international system. Among the RSCs which are commonly studied are the European, East Asian and Middle Eastern, with the argument that security concerns among the states which make up these regions have reached such a level of homogeneity that it is an effective practice to examine these concerns on a regional in addition to a state level. There are also states which lie between RSCs and are therefore studied as 'insulators' because they stand between larger security complexes and often face pressure from them. Examples of current insulator states are Afghanistan, Mongolia and Turkey.

As the original studies of RSCs by Buzan and Wæver argue, RSCs are rarely static and can often be altered due to political decisions and manipulation. For example, there was a significant shift in RSC boundaries and buffer zones, particularly in the developing world, after the cold war ended. The boundaries between RSCs can be porous, with security concerns in one area spilling over into others. For example, in the case of Asia, the authors suggested different RSCs for East, South and Southeast Asia, but also added that all regions' security concerns were becoming intertwined to the point where an Asian 'supercomplex' might be created which would incorporate these three RSCs plus Australia, with China and Japan acting as the main powers and policy shapers.<sup>14</sup>

However, the RSC concept as it relates to the Arctic is more difficult to translate, first and foremost because the original work does not extend the demarcation of these regional complexes into the Arctic region. The Arctic Ocean is not commonly incorporated into the proposed global network

10 Marc Lanteigne, 'Italy's Arctic Diplomacy: Past as Prologue,' *Arctic Journal*, 6 January 2016, <<http://arcticjournal.com/opinion/2069/past-prologue>>.

11 'Japan's Arctic Policy (provisional English Translation),' *Arctic Portal*, 21 October 2015, <<http://library.arcticportal.org/1883/>>; 'Keynote Speech by Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming at the China Country Session of the Third Arctic Circle Assembly,' *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 17 October 2015, <[http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/t1306858.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1306858.shtml)>.

12 On 'insecurity vs. 'asecurity', see Bahar Rumelili, 'Identity and Desecuritisation: The Pitfalls of Conflating Ontological and Physical Security,' *Journal of International Relations and Development* 18(January 2015): 52-74.

13 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 44.

14 Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 93-100; Barry Buzan, 'Security Architecture in Asia: The Interplay of Regional and Global Levels,' *Pacific Review* 16(2) (2003): 143-73.

of security complexes. Instead, the large space between the North American, European and Post-Soviet RSCs in the circumpolar north is blank, essentially a form of *terra nullius* (*mare nullius? glacies nullius?*) rather than a security complex. In the original Buzan and Wæver study, Greenland was given the dubious distinction of being an insulator state as it stood between the North American and European RSCs. It is debatable how much pressure Greenland is facing from these two complexes, but should the island develop as a resource power in the future as the result of ice erosion, that situation may change considerably.

Climate change in the Far North has opened up the question of whether the Arctic at this point in time should be considered 'securitised' and if so whether it could be considered an RSC of its own. Buzan and Wæver briefly address this question by suggesting that, in rare cases, RSCs do not coalesce because the units involved are too weak and more preoccupied with domestic affairs than regional ones, and the Arctic may be one of those rare cases of a 'null set', a place where the conditions for a security complex to develop are simply not present.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, although the political and economic linkages in the central Pacific are certainly not as strong as in other parts of the world, again due to geography, to say that no RSC exists at all is now arguable. As the Arctic becomes more connected in a variety of ways, there are several factors, starting with the effects of ice erosion and climate change, which are uniting Arctic communities despite distance and geography, and

these include economic security such as resource development and shipping, as well as human security such as the safety of persons living and working in the region, but also the larger area of development security including the potential effects of environmental change on the region, including disruption to traditional livelihoods and even potentially environment-based migrations.

Secondly, even assuming that the Arctic is currently a null set in terms of being a distinct securitised region, the changed security conditions in the Arctic, including issues related to non-traditional security concerns regarding the environment, development, climate and human security or security on the individual level are evolving to the point where even if there is no immediate 'scramble for the Arctic' or a Great Game / (Northern Edition), there will be a security complex created in short order as a result of internal and external political forces. The composition of the Arctic RSC will be quite different from others which exist, but the ongoing convergence of strategic concerns suggests that an Arctic regional security complex's development is a matter of when, not if. Future Arctic studies should therefore be prepared to better take into account this new level of analysis.

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<sup>15</sup> Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 64.



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