

ACTIVITY REPORT



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“Threats In, To, and Through the Canadian Arctic: A Framework for Analysis.”

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MythBuster

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P. Whitney Lackenbauer’s presentation “[Threats In, To, and Through the Canadian Arctic: A Framework for Analysis](#),” attempts to consolidate a decade of thinking about the assumptions driving – and empirical evidence supporting – Arctic narratives. Ranging from utopian ideas of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’ to the realpolitik of ‘sovereignty on thinning ice’, these duelling narratives are politically compelling but simplistic, predicated on either-or propositions that are so reductive of reality as to be considered by Lackenbauer to be ‘myths’. He goes on to assert that many of the wide-ranging data points woven together in support of these myths are ‘cherry-picked,’ creating an analytical hinderance and further divorcing these myths from reality. The result is many Canadians are left ill-informed about the Arctic and confused as to the policies states like Canada are undertaking towards the region.

Lackenbauer proposes a framework to question the assumptions and weigh the empirical evidence of these narratives. His framework disaggregates these myths into their component parts. Do these individual pieces of evidence explain the Arctic as their myths purport to do? In effect, Lackenbauer engages in Arctic ‘mythbusting.’

A Framework for Analysis

Lackenbauer’s framework is a ‘work in progress’ based around whether threats pass *through* the Arctic, pose threats *to* the Arctic, or originate *in* the Arctic. These distinctions allow for a nuanced examination of the strategic relationship between concepts of Arctic and international security that lies at the heart of the various myths, and how these concepts of security interact with one another. This framework is essentially an amalgam of international relations’ levels of analysis and the concept of sectors of security, allowing Lackenbauer to interrogate Arctic myths across the depth and breadth of security.¹

Developed by Kenneth Waltz in the 1950s, levels of analysis primarily engages the behaviour of the individual, the politics of the state, and the anarchic pressures of the international system.² Lackenbauer shifts this standard analysis, focusing on the ‘where’ of threats at the state, sub-regional (such as the North American and European Arctics), regional (like the circumpolar Arctic), and lastly the international levels. What is Canada’s primary concern in the North American Arctic as opposed to the Arctic writ large? How do those concerns line

up with the strategic competition of the international system? Levels of analysis puts down conceptual markers for mapping out how threats originating on one level can influence other levels.

The sectors of security were developed by the 'Copenhagen School' to help explain 'who' can do security in the name of 'what.'³ The 'who' are threats emanating from the military, political, economic, environmental, and societal sectors of security. The 'what' are referent objects, or that what is to be protected. For example the military sector is focused on the territorial integrity of the state whilst societal security deals with relationships of collective identity. Lackenbauer takes this a step further, drawing on the military's complimentary concept of 'domains' (such as land, sea, air, space, cyberspace, etc.) to examine the 'how' of threats. This approach allows Lackenbauer to engage myths across the spectrum from 'soft' human security fears to the 'hard' military defence concerns of states.

Arctic Mythology

"Sovereignty on Thinning Ice" is the major insecurity myth that Lackenbauer addresses. Arising out of the work of political scientist Rob Huebert at the start of the 2000s,⁴ the thinning ice thesis posits that climate change is driving mercantilist resource development in the Arctic. This development is undermining the sovereignty of the Arctic states, leading to regional conflict that will spill out onto the international system. Lackenbauer's critique is that thinning ice as a narrative trips over the regional/international levels of analysis, particularly when applied to the Canadian Arctic. He observes that climate change and resource development is happening elsewhere under the same or similar international governance. Those who have employed the thinning ice myth have not convincingly demonstrated what makes the Arctic different or 'exceptional' from elsewhere in the world.

Closely related to the thinning ice myth is the narrative that climate change, access to Arctic resources, and uncertainty over Arctic boundaries drive the hard security agenda in the North American Arctic. If the thinning ice myth is about conflict emanating out from the Arctic, this narrative is about international competition pushing into the region. Here Lackenbauer builds upon the work of the late Ken Eyre,⁵ arguing that the North American Arctic is a conduit *through* which hard military security passes. When Lackenbauer compares the military sector of security and the domains through which it operates with the levels of analysis, he finds that the threats are to the international system, not to the North American Arctic. For example, a Russian cruise missile that passes *through* the Arctic on its way to the American 'homeland' does not pose a threat *to* the region. That the hard security is driving the security agenda of the North American Arctic is another myth.

Lackenbauer argues that "The Arctic" constituting a single geostrategic theatre is yet another myth. While Russian military threats aim to pass *through* the North American Arctic on their way to targets in the south, much of the Russian nuclear deterrent and navy is stationed *in* their Arctic. Hence NATO poses a threat *to* the Russian Arctic. Similarly, NATO plans call for deterring threats *to* the European Arctic, particularly defending sea lines of communication and maritime approaches.⁶ "The Arctic" is in reality a collection of geostrategic theatres or 'many Arctics.'

The fact that weapons are intended to pass through the Arctic on their way deeper into North America demonstrates that the narrative of “[the North American homeland being a sanctuary](#)” from threat is another myth. The Arctic is not a regional of exceptional peace and cooperation, a pacific buffer between North America and threats to it. Lackenbauer suggests that this myth is a result of analysts conflating the levels of analysis between North America and the Arctic.

Conflating the levels of analysis is what drives two other narratives: the idea that Russia believes that it stands to gain from Arctic military conflict / conquest, and that the Arctic is a “leading strategic priority” for China. These countries are not primarily “Arctic threats,” Lackenbauer suggests, but two actors engaged in international revisionism. Losing the nuance that Canada can cooperate with Russia in the Arctic while competing with it internationally over the liberal international order – in effect being “frenemies”⁷ – could lead to outright hostility and an overly antagonistic relationship. China is a rising great power with global aspirations that include the Arctic but it would be a mistake to let a [Canadian fixation on the Arctic distort its overall engagement with the Middle Kingdom](#). Would China upsetting the Arctic’s regional governance help or hinder its international aspirations?

Lastly, Lackenbauer engages a myth that has persisted in Canada since the end of the Cold War, namely that Arctic human security concerns are at odds with hard power national security concerns such as the ones examined above. The 2019 [Canadian Arctic and Northern Policy Framework](#) is just the latest in list of policies that embrace broad and deep conceptions of security. Rather than assertions that hard security undermines soft security, Canadian policies have consistently aimed for these separate concerns to reinforce each other.

Conclusions

Lackenbauer’s *in, to, and through* framework – drawing on levels of analysis and sectors of security – enables him to tackle the empirical evidence of the ‘who, what, where, and how’ that informs Arctic myths. It also allows him to make deductions around the ‘when and why’ assumptions that drive these myths. Ultimately, Lackenbauer concludes that the Arctic is neither a region of exceptional cooperation nor conflict apart from the drivers of the greater international system. These forces are constantly at work through the depths of levels of analysis and across the breadth of security sectors. Losing this basic nuance was the ‘original sin’ of the busted myths.

Lackenbauer leaves his audience with the reminder that while the Arctic may be less ‘exceptional’ in practice than many myths suggest, one must nevertheless be careful in their applications of analogies to the region. He reiterates that those who study the Arctic must not prune data that does not validate their own *a priori* assumptions. For future analysis to be useful, Lackenbauer warns, assumptions regarding time horizons must be made clearer and not left open-ended. As the saying goes, even a broken watch is right twice a day. Lastly, Lackenbauer calls for more formal metrics of systemic change to be developed. Such a tool would help clearly identify shifts in the strategic framework of the Arctics, and comparison with frameworks elsewhere.

ACTIVITY REPORT



¹ Keith Krause and Micheal C. Williams, "Broadening the agenda of security studies: Politics and methods," *Mershon International Studies Review* 40:2 (1996): 229-254.

² Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War a Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1959).

³ Barry Buzan, *People, States & Fear: An agenda for international security studies in the post-cold war era* (Colchester: Ecpr Press, 2008) and Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

⁴ See *Northern Perspectives* 27:2 (2002): 1-24 for an overview of the conference that gave rise to the thinning ice thesis.

⁵ Ken Eyre, "Forty Years of Military Activity in the Canadian North, 1947-87," *Arctic* 40:4 (1987): 292-99.

⁶ Government of Canada, *Strong, Secure, and Engaged* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2017), 79-80.

⁷ Elana Wilson Rowe, "Analyzing frenemies: An Arctic repertoire of cooperation and rivalry," *Political Geography* 76 (2020): 102072.