

ACTIVITY REPORT



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[NAADSN Ideas Series: Did the Cold War Ever End?: The New Arctic Security Triangle Environment](#) by Dr. Rob Huebert

A Resumption of the Great Arctic Game

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On October 29, 2020 Dr. Rob Huebert gave a presentation as part of the NAADSN Ideas Series entitled “Did the Cold War Ever End?: The New Arctic Security Triangle Environment.” The presentation was orientated around the questions of “did the Cold War ever end” and “how should we understand the factors driving the Arctic security regime.” When looking at Arctic security, scholars need to avoid falling into simply challenging or accepting the “newisms,” and instead start to pay more attention to the methods and data that scholars are relying upon to draw conclusions. Dr. Huebert’s presentation can be broken into three sections: three hypotheses in regards to Arctic security, his argument that the Cold War never ended, and finally a look at the current status of the Arctic security environment.

Three Hypotheses for Arctic Security

Dr. Huebert presented three hypotheses that could describe the Arctic security environment: Arctic Exceptionalism, the Spillover, and the Never-ending Cold War.

Arctic Exceptionalism describes the group of literature that believes the Arctic is a special geopolitical theatre that experiences high levels of international cooperation. Due to the unique nature of the arena there needs to be new ontology applied to dealing with Arctic security. Scholars who follow the Arctic Exceptionalism hypothesis tend to place emphasis on international cooperative efforts, agreements, shared norms, and institutions. Arctic Exceptionalism tends to be the most popular of the three hypotheses.

The Spillover describes a scenario in which the Arctic is not a special region, and this hypothesis describes the Arctic as an afterthought and a peripheral theatre for the states involved. The only reason why it has been described as unique is due to the conceit of academic researchers. Thus, the cooperative status of Arctic geopolitics is dependent on the status of the international system as a whole. The Arctic does not drive action under this hypothesis but instead just receives action.

Dr. Huebert focused this presentation on his third hypothesis, the Never-ending Cold War. The Never-ending Cold War hypothesis boils down to the point that while the Arctic remains an important theatre in regards to great power politics, the Cold War never ended. This hypothesis is based on three key factors: the continued

existence of competing great powers, geography, and weapons technology. It is this hypothesis that was expanded upon in the rest of the presentation and this report.

The Cold War Never Ended

When trying to understand if the Cold War ever ended, it is important to use a long temporal period in order to properly identify key events. The international system has remained state-centric, but the balance of power has shifted from being a bi-polar system to what is now currently a tri-polar system. In order to argue that the Cold War never ended, Dr. Huebert utilized a long-term temporal approach to the region, beginning in 1940 deemed the Dawn of the Strategic Arctic; up through to present day, the Renewal of the Cold War which began in 2014. Through this hypothesis Dr. Huebert argued that the reasons the Arctic played such a key role in the traditional Cold War are still present today.

The existence of the great powers' competition continued to be demonstrated in the Arctic. The United States encountered a series of challenges at the end of the Trans-Atlantic hegemonic era. It faced challenges from the inside, the outside, and the inside/outside. The United States started to be challenged externally with the rise of China, and the resurgence of an overt Russian challenge.¹ The U.S. was challenged from the inside through the rise of the extreme right and the clear attacks on core democratic institutions. The challenges to the U.S. through the inside/outside describe the rise of hybrid warfare and cyber warfare.

Russia has demonstrated its desire to re-emerge as a great power competitor both in terms of budgeting through its 2007-2015 defence plan and in government rhetoric. Russia has demonstrated that its willing to use force in order to advance its political agenda, a key element in Great Power politics. An example of this political use of force is when the state acted against NATO expansion in regard to Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. The state has also been rebuilding its deterrent capabilities both in terms of nuclear deterrence and aerospace defence. Russia has been relatively successful in rebuilding power capabilities and has re-emerged as the Arctic regional hegemon.

One of the most important factors in determining if the Cold War ever ended is geography. In terms of geography, the Arctic never changed is geographic location. Also, as global climate change makes the Arctic more accessible than ever before and economic activity increases in the region, these factors need to be interpreted as intervening and not causal variables. A major reason why the Arctic was such an important geostrategic location during the traditional Cold War was because of weapons placement and the development of nuclear and missile technology, and Global Climate Change is making the placement of weapons in the Arctic more obvious than ever before. The Arctic was not the only region for the placement of weapons and deterrence amongst the core powers, but the geographic location of the Arctic was critical in terms of deterrence.

Importantly, the current interests of the core actors involved never changed. The Cold War never ended, but instead great power politics was reduced due to the exhaustion of the Soviet Union and the lack of Chinese power. Once China and Russia started to gather power the great power competition resumed. When the Cold War is discussed as beginning again, it ignores the fact that the Soviet Union was never defeated but instead

was exhausted. Ergo, the Cold War needs to be discussed as a modern resurgence instead of a “new” Cold War.

The New Arctic Security Triangle

The Arctic Security Triangle refers to the tri-polar Great Power Competition in the Arctic. Great Power Politics have been demonstrated in the Arctic after the Cold War is traditionally thought to have ended. Even during the height of Arctic Exceptionalism, the United States refused to join any international organization that contained hard security elements.² The core states also worked on maintaining and/or revitalizing their vital Arctic military capacities. Deterrence capabilities, especially nuclear capabilities, are still based in the Arctic and an increased naval presence is being demonstrated by the great powers in the region.

China is becoming a peer competitor with the United States and is working on improving its naval capacities, moving from a coastal navy to a blue-water navy and eventually to a white-water navy. In order for China to be a dominant world player, it needs to have the power to control the world’s oceans. Russia is developing as the Arctic regional hegemon and is continuing to militarize the Arctic. The world is entering a period of a renewed Great Power Competition, and the circumpolar Arctic is going to play a key role in the competition.

¹ See “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy.” 2007. Vladimir Putin. February 10, 2007. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

² See the first footnote in the Arctic Council’s founding document, the Ottawa Declaration, which reads: “The Arctic Council should not deal with matters related to military security.” “Ottawa Declaration.” 1996. September 19, 1996. https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/85/EDOCS-1752-v2-ACMMCA00_Ottawa_1996_Founding_Declaration.PDF?sequence=5&isAllowed=y.