

POLICY BRIEF



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“Understanding the Recent History of Energy Security in the Arctic”

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Purpose

The purpose of this policy brief is to present the key ideas of Petra Dolata’s chapter, “Understanding the Recent History of Energy Security in the Arctic.”¹

Background

Petra Dolata’s chapter examines the usefulness of the term “energy security” for understanding changes and trends in the Arctic region. Dolata concludes that based on the political context in which the term is predominately used and due to its poor definition and development in the academic literature, its usefulness is extremely limited for understanding or analyzing Arctic issues. She points out that the energy reality within the Arctic region is linked more to soft security issues than hard security issues such as militarization, as the use of the term “energy security” suggests. Her historical analysis of the term “energy security” reveals that it is best understood in a global geopolitical context and as a term of a particular time period.

According to Dolata, energy security became a common trope in discussions about the Arctic after 2005 because interest in the Arctic region and its

increasingly accessible fossil fuel reserves and new transportation routes coincided with heightened concerns over energy security in international politics. When shifting geopolitics and projected increased demand from developing countries and the U.S. created international anxiety around energy supply for countries reliant on energy imports, the Arctic’s potential importance for global energy security was imposed on the Arctic from the outside. Commentators drew on the well-established link between resources and conflict and cautioned that increased global interest in Arctic energy resources could challenge the sovereignty and security of Arctic states. This narrative was used by some Arctic littoral states to justify policies of financial commitments and militarization of the region. Dolata critiques that use because the focus on energy security in these strategies did not reflect energy realities on the ground, nor address the energy insecurities of those living in the Arctic. Instead, it emphasized the potential for conflict and security threats over the existing framework of co-operation and the importance of non-state actors in the region.

In her chapter, Dolata traces the historical origin, usage, and development of the term energy security. Energy security is closely linked to the U.S. experience during the energy crises of the 1970s,

and should be understood as a response to concerns of supply shortages and the vulnerability associated with being dependant on imported energy. Oil and its strategic significance for waging wars and economic prosperity was recognized throughout the 20th century. However, the concept of energy security explicitly linking security of supply to the survival of the state was not used in the national security discourse until the 1970s. Ensuring security of supply through military force, if necessary, became embedded in the U.S. national security discourse through the Carter Doctrine (1980). Although originating in the U.S., energy security came to mean Western energy security more broadly because of the influential role of the U.S. in international politics. Energy security has since become an accepted goal of public policy and is used to rationalize external energy policies especially during times of perceived scarcity. Dolata attributes the prominent use of this term in international politics to these historical factors.

Considerations

Drawing on previous work linking energy security to human security, Dolata distinguishes between the importance of energy for economic security at a global or state level and its impacts on human and environmental security at a local level, with clear implications for considering energy developments in the Arctic. Energy security goes beyond traditional conceptualizations of state security and is associated with economic and human security more broadly. The importance of energy for human security and individual well-being was recognized by the UN in 1948 under its “freedom from want” dictum. In the global context, energy developments are significant for ensuring economic and human security, but they can also have negative environmental and social impacts which affect populations at the local level. Therefore, while Arctic energy resources could help

contribute to human well-being outside the Arctic, there is no clear connection to reducing energy insecurity in the Arctic. In addition, the adverse impacts of fossil fuel development and transportation could further threaten human and environmental security within the region. Although in academic discussions the energy security concept is broadly connected to human security and well-being, the political energy security narrative that supports the importance of energy developments in the Arctic does not translate well to understanding or addressing soft security issues (human and environmental) within the Arctic. This disparity between academic and political discourses and between security on the global and local level is another reason why Dolata argues that the energy security concept does not apply well to the Arctic.

Dolata goes on to suggest that the preoccupation with energy security in the Arctic in international politics was a result of the re-emergence of global geopolitical concerns over energy security in the mid-2000s, which coincided with very tangible impacts of climate change in the Arctic providing access to potential fossil fuel deposits and trade routes. In a historical discussion of events between 2006 and 2009, she shows how international organizations such as the G8, EU and NATO focused on energy security. Energy supply disruptions to Europe from Russia prompted countries and organizations such as the G8 and EU to adopt energy security as an important geopolitical issue. NATO legitimized its involvement in matters of energy security in recognition of the vulnerability of its member states due to increasing reliance on imported energy. New NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe were especially worried about supply disruptions in the mid-2000s because of a significant reliance on energy imported from Russia. NATO later softened its involvement in energy security to include only energy infrastructure security amid concerns that a hard stance would

antagonize Russia, whose behaviour was often linked to energy insecurity, and to avoid militarization of the issue. Dolata argues that between the years 2006 and 2009 energy was an important geopolitical and strategic topic in international politics, beyond the conventional scope of institutional frameworks such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Energy Agency (IEA). This focus on energy security was also closely tied to the discourse on climate change at the time. The Arctic became a natural area of focus in this discussion because of both the dramatic effects of climate change in the region, which was linked to the burning of fossil fuels, and as a new source of energy resources. Non-Arctic European states and the U.S. drove the energy security agenda at this time as net importers of energy over concerns of security of supply which coincided with decreasing ice cover in the Arctic and favourable reports of fossil fuel reserves in the region.

Referring to well-established literature on resources and conflict, Dolata explains how once energy security discourses were inscribed to the Arctic from the outside, energy resources were considered drivers of conflict. But she cautions that this conflict narrative does not apply well to the Arctic. Although commentators warned that resource conflict could happen in the Arctic, Arctic states seem committed to resolving conflicts through existing international frameworks. For example, the five Arctic littoral states reaffirmed their co-operative relationship in the Arctic Ocean and committed to resolving disputes surrounding extended continental shelf claims through existing international frameworks under the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008. More importantly, most fossil fuel resources are already located within Arctic littoral countries' EEZs in which they have exclusive rights to exploit these resources. Therefore, energy security is not a driver of conflict in the Arctic, contrary to what some rhetoric has suggested.

Dolata further questions the usefulness of the Arctic energy security paradigm by noting that it mostly focuses on supply security and is mainly driven by countries that are net importers of fossil fuels. Three of the five Arctic littoral states Canada, Russia and Norway are major oil producers and net exporters of fossil fuels. The U.S. is also a major oil producer but was a net importer prior to 2010. According to Dolata, the reason why Arctic oil producers such as Canada and Norway were engaging in international discussions on energy security at the time was that they hoped to secure demand for their energy. The energy security trope was used by both countries for political and trade purposes, and their Arctic policies were not really about energy issues in the region. For Canada, this is simply because its energy production is centered in the Alberta oilsands and not in the Arctic, and even though there is fossil fuel development in the Barents Sea, and this is portrayed as important for EU energy security, energy issues are a relatively insignificant part of Norwegian Arctic policy. Evidently, these countries engage in energy security discussions in response to external pressures and not on their own accord.

Conclusion

Dolata's chapter concludes that the energy security concept does not apply well to the Arctic for a variety of reasons and does not represent the interests and needs of those living in the region. She asserts that energy security cannot be understood from within the Arctic region in the same way that it is understood in a global geopolitical context and highlights the need to stop applying the wrong concepts when examining Arctic issues, not least because it is not necessarily used by Northerners and Indigenous actors in the Arctic region. Rather, she says energy development in the Arctic must be understood through the lens

POLICY BRIEF



of environmental, economic, and human security, otherwise referred to as soft security.

¹ Petra Dolata, "Understanding the Recent History of Energy Security in the Arctic," in *Breaking Through: Understanding Sovereignty and Security in the Circumpolar Arctic*, eds. Wilfrid Greaves and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 185-98.