

# POLICY BRIEF



MARCH 16, 2021

## The Case for Traditional Security

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### Purpose

This brief aims to introduce the key ideas presented in Dr. Rob Huebert's latest chapter, *Understanding Arctic Security: A Defence of Traditional Security Analysis*.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the chapter, Huebert tackles two major questions: "What is the case against using traditional security to understand the modern Arctic security environment? And what contribution could a traditional security framework make?" (81). In the chapter, Huebert argues that the narrow/traditional security framework is still a viable tool for Arctic research in cases related to national security.

### Conceptualizing Security: Narrow versus Broad

For those concerned with the nature of security, there tend to be two overarching schools of thought that one would fall into: those who argue for a broader, more expansive definition of security, and those who argue for the narrow/traditional understanding. Traditional theorists focus on military and strategic studies, while expanded theorists include human, environmental, and health security within their conception of security (80). In the chapter, Huebert explains that scholars who actively try to delegitimize the traditional

security framework in relation to the Arctic prevent the traditional security experts from engaging in the Arctic debates (81).

The narrow/traditional reading of security is based on the legitimization of state-controlled force. Huebert points out that scholars who understand the international system through this traditional security lens will be therefore rightly concerned about how military action gets interpreted on the global stage (83).

### The Unexceptional Arctic

Due to the Arctic being considered by many to be a region of exception, some scholars have questioned the legitimacy of applying a traditional security framework to describe the Arctic's post-Cold War security environment. The "Arctic exceptionalism" thesis is based on the belief that the Arctic is an exceptional geopolitical theatre in which states behave differently than they would in other arenas (83). This thesis is formulated on the idea that the harsh and isolated nature of the region makes the Arctic states more willing to behave in a cooperative manner, which allows for cooperation amongst even those who are not traditional cooperative partners (e.g., Russia and the United States). Within the academic community, those who embrace the broader conception of security have tended to treat the

traditional security framework “as a straw man that is then easily discarded” (84).

A problem with the overt dismissal of the traditional security framework in regard to the Arctic is the normative assumptions that are then placed upon the traditionalists. The traditional scholars, by continuing to understand the Arctic through the narrow security lens, are then charged with shaping the security environment into a place in which their framework is valued. In other words, due to the ongoing scholarship produced by the traditional scholars, the Arctic states may decide to act competitively. Therefore, utilizing a traditional security analysis is morally problematic because it threatens the very nature of the established international Arctic cooperation (85). In addition, while more scholars have embraced the notion of an expanded definition of security, government analysts and the overall public perception have tended to stay with the traditional security model. Thus, the traditional theorists have maintained their control over the non-academic audience despite large portions of the academic audience trending away from the traditional view of security (85-6).

While Dr. Huebert explains the reasons why some scholars may view the Arctic as a region of exception, he rejects the Arctic exceptionalism thesis and the belief that continuing to use traditional security analysis increases tension and competition in the circumpolar Arctic (87). Huebert argues that the reason the Arctic appears exceptional is instead due to its harsh climate and geographic isolation. As soon as the region is more readily accessible, it will cease to be the global exception. States will more overtly chase their national interests, as they already do in other geopolitical theatres (87-8).

## Return to Hard Security

Huebert remarks that the loss of “exceptionalism,” if it existed in the first place, can easily be seen since Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, and that the Arctic has experienced a resurgence of great power competition and hard politics. Huebert gives three reasons for this statement. First, for Russia and the United States, the Arctic plays a key part of their respective national security strategies (89). Second, the Arctic states are strengthening their national Arctic military capabilities, and Finland and Sweden are becoming more involved with NATO (90). The final argument Huebert uses to support his point is that China has begun taking a more active role in the Arctic and is developing its own Arctic military capacities (91). While these points all may have started before the annexation of Crimea, they were largely ignored by scholars who continued to support the Arctic exceptionalism thesis.

The chapter clearly points out that while the Arctic may no longer be considered an exceptional political theatre characterized by international peace and cooperation, this does not mean that there is conflict over the Arctic. The analysis instead is demonstrating that the Arctic has become a place for international competition, as it is a political arena in which both Arctic and non-Arctic states have military defence interests (91). Furthermore, this Arctic military resurgence *cannot* be attributed to the few scholars who have attempted to use the traditional security frameworks, as the majority of scholars were applying a broad definition of security during this period (91).

The chapter concludes with Huebert reminding the reader that while the Arctic may be changing and competition is returning, it is not returning to the levels that were seen during the Cold War. While

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there are many Arctic issues suited to different types of analysis, the question of state military

power needs to be understood and analyzed through the narrow/traditional security lens (92).

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Huebert, "Understanding Arctic Security: A Defence of Traditional Security Analysis," in *Breaking Through: Understanding Sovereignty and Security in the Circumpolar Arctic*, eds. Wilfrid Greaves and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 80-96.