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An Undeserved Reputation: Revising Canada's Arctic Sovereignty and Security under the Harper Government

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Purpose

This policy brief examines and presents key policy implications of P. Whitney Lackenbauer's chapter, "Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Canadian Security and Safety in the Arctic."[1]

Background

Lackenbauer's chapter interrogates the discourse surrounding Arctic sovereignty and security under Stephen Harper's Conservative governments (2006-15). Much of the early scholarly attention on this era focused on the role of the Canadian Armed Forces and their employment, addressing themes of 'sovereignty threats,' the 'race for resources,' and the overall 'militarization of the Arctic.' A narrative developed from these themes casting Harper as a sort of militaristic 'Arctic antagonist,' which persists to this day.[2] Lackenbauer argues that this negative narrative, based on isolated data points during the short 'use it or lose it' phase from 2006-07, does not reflect Harper's full tenure in office. Accordingly, he corrects misconceptions about how the Harper Conservatives' evolving articulations of 'Arctic

sovereignty' fit into Canada's overall Arctic policy trajectory.

As with his ongoing work to distinguish between "threats in, to, and through the Canadian Arctic," Lackenbauer suggests the need for a more systemic analysis of Canadian Arctic policy. Did the initial Harper framework preclude the military from discerning appropriate roles for itself? How did the Harper government's rhetoric change over time? Using a securitization approach, Lackenbauer maps the salient shift in the Harper government's Arctic sovereignty and security messaging, which many academics have missed.

A Securitizing Approach

Drawing on earlier empirical work with Harper government speeches and policy pronouncements, Lackenbauer uses a variation of social securitization[3] to map the iterative process between the government and the military to demonstrate policy change over time. Developed by the 'Copenhagen School,'[4] securitization theory posits that a security issue is produced through a 'speech act' by a

'securitizing actor.' The speech act presents the issue as an existential threat requiring a response beyond 'normal' political practices – known as a securitizing move – and convinces an 'audience' that this is the case. Lackenbauer's sociological securitization provides a longitudinal study of Canadian Arctic policy by not resting on a single speech act, but rather a 'conversation' between securitizing actors over time.

Most work in securitization theory has examined the relationship between the securitizing actor and the audience, but Lackenbauer focuses on the often-neglected role of the 'functional actor' who significantly influences security decisions. With this focus on the functional actor, the speech act is not about how it is converted into action, but how the military, as a functional actor, interprets the context in which the speech act is made. In Lackenbauer's model, the military pulls double duty, being an audience to the government's speech acts as well as a functional actor in how it subsequently selects, articulates, and implements security policies. This grants the military additional agency beyond the regular sociological securitization approach, as these actions in turn provide context for future government speech acts, further developing Canadian Arctic sovereignty and security policy.

The Salient Shift

The 'Arctic antagonist' narrative casts Prime Minister Harper as contributing to an emerging regional security dilemma through his promotion of militarized, state-centric understandings of Arctic sovereignty and security, with a preference for an active defence posture over diplomacy to distinguish his government from his Liberal predecessors. Lackenbauer questions this narrative using two core arguments. First, initial government messaging set political preferences that did not

preclude the military from exercising agency to discern appropriate roles for its approach to the Arctic. Second, he asserts that securitization analysis should not rest on a single data point; ideas about sovereignty and security were translated into new frameworks after 2008, which yield more accurate understandings of how official discourse evolved over time.

Lackenbauer notes that early Harper Conservative rhetoric – while in Opposition and upon forming government – reinforced a logic that linked Arctic sovereignty and national defence,[5] positioning the CAF as bearing the primary responsibility to 'defend' and 'strengthen' Canada's Arctic sovereignty. This misses the policy nuance that is revealed by considering the military as an audience *and* as a functional actor. From the audience perspective, the military did not accept that the Arctic threat environment required an exceptional response. Instead, the military (in its role as a functional actor) articulated and implemented a whole-of-government approach towards the Arctic that downplayed military threats to the region and emphasized soft security and safety challenges in the 2008 *Canada First Defence Strategy*.[6] The military also reflected this threat assessment in practice through sovereignty exercises like Operation NANOOK, which promoted a comprehensive approach to security.

The antagonist narrative rests on early Harper political rhetoric[7] – in effect, a 'snapshot' in time. Lackenbauer points out the limitations of relying on a single speech act that divorces the narrative from a larger policy context that develops over time. By carefully analyzing the language around 'sovereignty' over time, Lackenbauer reveals how Harper's initial pessimistic outlook, fixated on traditional military threats, shifted to a more optimistic outlook rooted in addressing soft security challenges post-2008. The comprehensive *Canada's*

Northern Strategy, released in July 2009, and the *Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*, released in August 2010, created a discursive space that displaced the military, in government messaging, from an assigned role of 'defending' sovereignty, and instead articulated notions of it helping to 'exercise' sovereignty by supporting the safety and security of Canadians. As Lackenbauer shows, this shift in Arctic policy can only be discerned through longitudinal study.

Conclusions

Lackenbauer's comprehensive approach promotes the longitudinal study of Canadian Arctic policy. His methodology suggests the need for empirical baselines that can be measured for change and magnitude of change over time. Tracing speech acts over time can disperse persistent and sometimes pernicious narratives built upon a single (or a few) 'cherry-picked' data points, by contextualizing them in a larger policy arc. Instead of an Arctic policy marked as militaristic, unilateralist, and sovereignty-obsessed, Lackenbauer suggests that the Harper Conservatives "ultimately legitimized a whole-of-government approach to Arctic security" based on soft security and safety threats over traditional military ones. As he has subsequently pointed out, this helps to explain why Justin Trudeau's Liberals have continued to promote the comprehensive approach ultimately espoused by their predecessors.[8]

Similarly, Lackenbauer's careful articulation and analysis of the role of the military as a functional actor provides additional agency to an audience, beyond simply accepting or rejecting a securitizing move. This method allows for a more careful examination of federal departments and agencies, placing them in an iterative process with political leadership where their implementation of policy in turn informs future political direction. Lackenbauer suggests that this process could lead scholars to revisit assumptions about how political direction is interpreted and enacted in policy, and this chapter offers a strong indication of the value of doing so.

Lackenbauer's analysis – particularly of the 2005-09 period – demonstrates how the military interpreted broad political messaging in a way that did not militarize the Canadian Arctic, but instead promoted a whole-of-government approach that contributed to Canada's comprehensive Arctic policy. While the whole-of-government approach embedded in *Canada's Northern Strategy* has been criticized for its lack of policy specifics and prescriptive elements, its inherent flexibility allowed the military to meet changing political realities and the most pressing security requirements. Canada's 2019 Arctic and Northern Policy Framework follows suit, articulating the need for a whole-of-society approach to safety, security, and defence, while simultaneously promoting vigilance as the international system transitions to resurgent great power competition.

[1] P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Canadian Security and Safety 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), 137-67.

[2] See, for example, Klaus Dodds, "Flag Planting and Finger Pointing: The Law of the Sea, the Arctic and the Political Geographies of the Outer Continental Shelf," *Political Geography* 29:2 (2010): 63-73.

[3] For an excellent source on sociological securitization, see Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How security problems emerge and dissolve* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[4] See the Copenhagen School's primary text, Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

[5] This logic was based on the 'thinning ice thesis' created by Rob Huebert in the early 2000s. See *Northern Perspectives* 27:2 (2002): 1-24 for an overview of the conference that gave rise to the thinning ice thesis.

[6] Canada, *Canada First Defence Strategy* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2008).

[7] Particularly Harper's 9 July 2007 speech, "Prime Minister Stephen Harper Announces New Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships." See P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Ryan Dean (eds.), "Canada's Northern Strategy under Prime Minister Stephen Harper: Key Speeches and Documents, 2005-15," *Documents on Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security* 6 (2016): 26-7 at https://cmss.ucalgary.ca/sites/cmss.ucalgary.ca/files/dcassv6.pdf.

[8] P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Canada's Emerging Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: Confirming a Longstanding Northern Strategy," in *Breaking the Ice Curtain? Russia, Canada, and Arctic Security in a Changing Circumpolar World*, eds. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Suzanne Lalonde (Calgary: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2019), 13-42.